

A Distant Star, A Burning Sun

by LJ9

Category: Brave, 2012, How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Romance

Language: English

Characters: Hiccup, Merida, Stoick, Toothless

Status: Completed

Published: 2013-05-11 04:41:44

Updated: 2014-03-31 07:05:09

Packaged: 2016-04-26 15:04:40

Rating: T

Chapters: 18

Words: 34,800

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Hiccup and Merida help each other find a way home.

1. Chapter 1

****Disclaimer:**** I don't own anything you recognize here, the things that belong to Cressida Cowell, Dreamworks, and Disney-Pixar.

The majority of what's here is based on the two movies. I took a few details from the HTTYD wiki, but I've not read the books nor seen more than one or two episodes of the show, so don't expect anything to be consistent with those.

This fic contains selective use of historical facts and abuse of a language I don't actually know. Please forgive any mistakes I've made.

Thanks to Mel for enduring my screaming about this one. I hope you guys like it!

****Updated 30 March 2014: no new content, just better formatting.****

* * *

><p>Toothless wheeled, turning to follow the coastline. Rumors of raiders crossing the seas to pillage had reached Berk, and the dragon riders were devoting extra time to watching the horizon. They'd learned to live with the dragons and had enjoyed three years of calm togetherâ€"well, relative calm; there were lots of small fires and fights between young dragons, especially at first, but none of it could compare with the terror of the raids at night. And now they were all preparing for visits from two-legged raiders. Some of them were preparing with a little too much glee: Snotlout's axe had never been shinier or sharper, and Hiccup wondered if anticipation could literally drive a person insane. But for now all was quiet. The line between water and sky looked much as it usually didâ€"blank,

hazy, uninspiringâ€"but something else had caught Hiccup's attention. On the rocky shore, just outside the trees, was an orange glow, bright in the day's gloom. He lost sight of it as the dragon turned.

There it was again: a blaze like a burning ember. From this height, and surrounded by patches of late-spring snow as it was, it was like a beacon. _Or a warning_, he thought, though a warning of what he had no idea. As he urged Toothless lower Hiccup saw that it was not a fire at all. Whatever it was, it wasn't moving. Though it didn't look threatening, he guided the dragon to a clear spot to land: Hiccup had to check it outâ€"that was the point of patrolling, after allâ€"but he also needed to satisfy his own curiosity. The flare of color represented a small mystery. The idea brought a smile to Hiccup's face; nothing much had sparked his curiosity lately. Between working in the smithy, patrolling and training, and studying the law with the elders, he hadn't had time for creativity. His father would probably lecture him if he knew what was in Hiccup's head as he slid from the saddle on Toothless' back. He could hear Stoick's voice already, demanding to know where his weapon was and what he planned to do if he found himself under attack, and he took pleasure in ignoring the voice. Still, though he wasn't expecting danger, he approached carefully.

It was a personâ€"a girl, to judge from the blaze of her hair, snarled and dusty. She lay on the ground, a rough cloak wrapped around her, and she was shivering. Hiccup wasn't sure anyone could pretend to shiver so convincingly, and he couldn't imagine she was a threat or a scout or anything other than in need of help. He crouched a bit awkwardly, within arm's reach, but not too close. "Hey," he said, and then louder, "Hey!" putting a hand on her shoulder and jostling it slightly. There was no response from the shaking stranger. Hiccup watched her breathe, thinking, wondering what his father would do, what the others in the village would do.

Then he felt Toothless' eyes on him, alert and bright, and any hesitation he had disappeared. As carefully as he could he picked up the girl. She was not heavy, but his leg squeaked a bit at the extra weight all the same. He set the girl on Toothless' back, just in front of the saddle; he looped a length of rope loosely around the dragon's middle and then paused, considering. If she woke up mid-flight there was no telling what her reaction might be, and the last thing he wanted was for her to fall. With an apologetic expression that she didn't see, Hiccup wrapped the free end of the rope around her, trapping her arms. Once he'd climbed on and secured himself, he pulled the girl close, hoping his body heat would warm her somewhat.

"Gently," he said, and Toothless rose into the air with enviable grace.

* * *

><p>His father would likely be in the great hall, attending to the village's business, but the forge would be warmer. Gobber had two young apprentices now, a pair of cousins who were already better smiths than Hiccup ever would have been, if the word of their master was to be believed. The fires would be roaring, with one of the boys swinging on the bellows and the other fetching wood and water as Gobber directed them over the din. He'd take her to the smithy.

Gobber would know what to do.<p>

Toothless landed in front of the building, and even from outside Hiccup could feel the warmth. He unbuckled and slid down, untying the rope that encircled the girl, thanking whoever was listening that she hadn't woken up and done anything crazy on the way there. He trusted Toothless to catch her if she fell, but Hiccup wasn't sure if she was hurt, and people in pain were unpredictable. He staggered a bit as the dead weight flopped against him and made a less-than-heroic entrance into the smithy.

"Hiccup, what're you doin' here?" Gobber bellowed above the hissing and clanging. He wiped sweat from his forehead and then noticed Hiccup's burden. "What's goin' on?"

"She needs help."

Gobber's expression was one of exasperation mixed with concern. He shouted for the boys to shut up while motioning for Hiccup to come in. "We found her near the cliffs on the northeast coast. She's breathing, but she's cold and she won't wake up."

"Brought her to the right place, then," Gobber said briskly. "Set her near the fire— not too near, though, don't want to get her too warm too fast. Squatwiggles, fetch some wine; Wart, water. In _clean_ cups, mind." Hiccup set the girl down on a low workbench as the boys scurried to fulfill their tasks. With a delicacy usually only applied to his workmanship Gobber drew the cloak away from her. "No blood. That's good."

"Nothing felt broken when I moved her. And she hasn't made any noise, so I think she's not hurt." Hiccup looked down at the girl's face, pale and streaked with dirt. "Just really, really cold."

"She must not be from around here, then." Gobber laid the back of his hand against the girl's forehead and cheeks; then he lifted one limp arm and felt the vein at the inside of her wrist. Hiccup studied her. The girl seemed to be about the same age as him. He wondered what color her eyes were— would be, whenever she opened them. Now it was obvious that she was not a Viking: the dress she wore, though snagged and stained, was nicer than any he'd ever seen, made of some fine, expensive fabric, bordered with gold embroidery in complicated knots. He traced the twists absently with a fingertip as Gobber wiped the girl's face with a dampened rag.

When the boys returned they were sent on more errands: for blankets and to ask that a broth be made and to inform the chieftain of the presence of a sick stranger in Berk.

"Lift her up, Hiccup." At the smith's command he slipped his arm around her shoulders and lifted her up; Gobber tilted the cup of honey wine at her lips. When she swallowed, Hiccup let out the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

"Will she be okay?"

Gobber shrugged. "We don't know how strong she is or if she's sick," he said. "All we've done is all we can do. We'll have to wait and see." He dropped a heavy hand on Hiccup's shoulder, the most comfort he seemed able to offer.

The door creaked open, and his father's voice called "Gobber?" from the doorway. The smith clomped to the front of the forge and the two spoke in relatively quiet voices, but Hiccup heard them nonetheless.

"Maybe one day that son of yours will stop bringing home strays," Gobber joked.

"I doubt it. He's his mother's son as well as mine." Stoick's even tread approached, and he greeted his son calmly. "Hiccup."

He looked up at the bulk of his father. "Hey, Dad."

Stoick studied the girl impassively for a moment, eyes flicking from her hair to the cloak to the trim of her gown and then back to her hair. Hiccup had no idea what he was thinking. Probably that his son was more trouble than he was worth.

Finally Stoick looked at his son. "Well, this one's much prettier than the last one," he said, smirking. Hiccup felt his face flush.

"That's not why I did it!" Hiccup leaned as far back from the girl as he could manage without falling over, waving his hands. Stoick's smirk widened at the overreaction, and Hiccup covered his face with one splayed hand.

"I know, son. Now come on."

"I don't want to leave," he mumbled between his fingers, embarrassed to admit it.

"I know that, too. And I know that if I dragged you home you'd sneak out in the middle of the night to watch over her. We're taking her home. You can fret over her there." As Stoick bent to lift the girl he added in a loud whisper, "You don't really think I want her to wake up here, do you?"

Hiccup grinned. "Thanks, Dad."

* * *

><p>They set the girl on a low couch in front of the fire. It was lined with fur rugs and piled with blankets, a cosy nest; there was water nearby and an empty bucket, in case she suddenly took a turn for the worse.<p>

Hiccup settled himself at the table, his sketchbook open in front of him and charcoal at hand. On the page before him there were designs to perfect, problems to solve, if only he could focus on them. But his attention kept wandering away to the figure on the couch until it was pointless to even pretend he was doing work.

His father paused at the foot of the stairs. "Good night, son."

"Night, Dad."

Ruff and/or Tuff would snigger and call him a stalker if they could

see him staring across the room, watching the steady rise and fall of her breathing. Worse, he'd be unable to explain, to them or anyone else, why he was so concerned. It wasn't as if the girl meant anything to them; she wasn't important or special or even one of them. She was just...a mystery. Alone. A lost creature.

All the things he couldn't resist.

2. Chapter 2

Of course she would wake up in the middle of the night.

It felt like he'd just fallen asleep moments before, head pillowed against one arm on the table, when he heard a gasp. It was followed by a soft scrabbling noise. Hiccup pushed himself up, rubbing his eyes with the back of one hand, squinting toward the hearth. At first he thought a spark had flown out and started a fire, but then he remembered the red-haired girl. She was awake and sitting up, clutching one of the blankets around her body, her eyes wide as she whipped her head around, taking in the darkened room. "Hey," Hiccup said, with the eloquence and intelligence of the newly-conscious, "you're awake."

The head turned toward him and she shrank back into the couch as he approached. "It's okay," he soothed. "Are you thirsty?" When he bent to pick up the water she clambered backward, off the edge of the couch.

Hiccup watched in confusion as she moved, crouched low, muttering something he couldn't catch. With her attention trained on him she made her way around the back of the couch and toward the door. It was a path not clear of obstacles, and in particular not clear of the bulk of a sleeping Night Fury, well-disguised in the dim light. "Some guardian you are," Hiccup muttered, then raised his voice to address the girl. "You might want to watch out," he said, just before she grunted and fell.

From the darkness he heard the rustling of dragon hide and a shriek that cut off abruptly. He dropped the tankard of water and hurtled over the couch, not entirely sure who he would have to protect from who. He landed just in front of Toothless' head; the dragon nudged him in the back, curious about what was happening. Hiccup had thought the girl's eyes were wide before, but now they were huge as she backed away, one hand covering her mouth and the other on her hip—where a knife would be, Hiccup realized. "It's okay," he said again, slowly spreading his arms. "No one's gonna hurt you." She shook her head, eyes blinking closed for a moment; when she opened them she shook her head again. With a slightly trembling hand she pointed at them and spoke.

When she'd muttered before, he'd thought he just hadn't heard her. This time her voice was clear enough across the room; it was the words themselves that didn't make any sense. He frowned. "Did you hit your head?"

She frowned right back at him and said more words, or at least what Hiccup assumed were words. He spared a glance at Toothless, whose head was cocked curiously, but who made no sign of understanding her, either. Hiccup looked back at the girl and shrugged. Her response,

throwing her hands into the air and rolling her eyes in exasperation, took him by surprise, and he laughed. Immediately he turned red and the chuckle trailed off as he rubbed the back of his neck; but when he looked up again her expression was more curious than anything else.

Encouraged, Hiccup took a step forward. He pointed at his face, smiling hopefully, and said, "Hiccup." Then, feeling a nose pushing into his back, he stepped aside, laid his hand on the nose, and said, "Toothless." He couldn't help adding, "He's really harmless"well, not harmless at all, I mean he is a _dragon_, but he won't hurt you. Probably."

She had the usual response to his rambling: a frown of confusion tinged with annoyance creased her face. He muttered an apology. She pointed at him and then Toothless, repeating their names slowly and carefully in an accent that sounded unlike any he'd ever heard. Then she put a hand on her chest and said, "Merida."

* * *

><p>It wasn't exactly like trying to gain Toothless' trust, but it didn't feel that much different. It was somehow more frustrating: he'd never expected Toothless to be able to speak, but Merida was a human, and therefore they should have been able to communicate.

He started by walking away. Hiccup patted Toothless' head and returned to sit on the couch; the dragon followed him, curling up on the floor at one end. He was counting on that curiosity he'd seen in her eyes, and hoping that she viewed him as nonthreatening, the way the rest of Berk did. He remembered what Stoick had said about her waking up at the forge and shuddered at the idea of Gobber's being the first face she saw. He gestured for her to come over and then watched as the gears in her head turned.

Would she judge him trustworthy? It must have been obvious that she was being cared for here; she'd woken fed and cleaned (a bit) and bundled up warm. And while Hiccup would acknowledge that their home was clearly that of bachelors, it was tidy and smelled better than some others he could name. Merida bit her lip, thinking. Did she even know where she was? Would it be better to risk whatever was outside, or what was sitting patiently in front of the hearth?

So he wouldn't stare Hiccup looked away, smoothing the furs on the seat and leaning down to retrieve the fallen tankard. When he straightened up again she stood at the far end of the couch, and as he watched she sat down, delicately and deliberately and as far from him as she could be. For a moment they looked at each other. Her eyes were blue, the color of glacier ice in the winter, and he found himself hoping for a cloudless day so he could see what colors her hair was in the sunlight. Then he realized that he was probably staring, again, and dropped his gaze to the mug in his hands. It gave him an idea, and something to do.

Her eyes went wide again as he stood and went to refill the cup, returning with one for himself, too. He offered one to her and she hesitated, licking her lips as she looked from his face to the mug held out to her and back. Surely she didn't think he'd put something gross in it, but in case that was what she was worried about, he took

a gulp from the mug and swallowed it. This time she accepted the cup and drank, obviously thirsty. After a moment she lowered the cup slowly and smiled, embarrassed.

He wished he could babble at her—his awkwardness would definitely make her feel better about herself, if she could understand it. Otherwise it'd probably just frustrate her. He sipped from the cup. Might as well start small, Hiccup thought, and said, "Water." At her uncomprehending expression he dipped a finger in his mug and shook the droplets off, saying the word again. She repeated it a few times; then Merida said another word that he supposed meant water in her language (_what _was_ her language? where was she from?). As he repeated it, she wet her fingers and flicked them at him. She giggled at the face he made, water dripping from his nose, and drained the rest of her drink.

"Water?" she asked, holding out the cup, looking hopeful and shy. He smiled and took the cup to refill it, even if she was planning to empty the whole thing on his head.

* * *

><p>The next time he opened his eyes sunlight was creeping under the shutters. He yawned and stretched; next to him Toothless whuffled. At the other end of the couch the girl—"Merida"—lay curled up, clutching a blanket in her arms. Hiccup hoped that his father would be able to shed some light on the situation, because having all these questions and no answers was killing him. Now wasn't the time to worry about his ignorance, though; there were chores to do. So he set to work shooing Toothless outside, gathering an armful of wood for the fires, preparing breakfast, and then hurrying to fetch water from the well, all the while hoping that Merida was still sleeping soundly. As he returned, full buckets yoked over his shoulders, a shout from inside crushed his dreams. It was hardly a surprise.

When he pushed into the kitchen Stoick was looming over the table, burly arms akimbo, glaring down at their guest. Merida was frozen, spoon halfway to her mouth; a lump of porridge plopped back into the bowl as she stared up at the man. "Is she eatin' my breakfast?" Stoick demanded. He was not a morning person by any means, and especially not before he'd had something to eat.

"Looks like it," Hiccup said. "I'll get you another bowl, all right?"

Stoick squinted after him as he moved into the kitchen. "She hasn't said anythin'. I yelled, and she's just lookin' at me." And it was true: though she wasn't moving, the girl looked as unafraid of the chieftain as he'd ever seen anyone look. Her expression held more curiosity and—"was that a hint of _amusement_?"

"She doesn't understand our language." When Stoick cocked his head questioningly, he shrugged. "We, uh, met last night." Hiccup set a bowl and spoon on the table in front of his father, who sat, grumbling about the fact that she'd taken his seat, too. "Dad, this is Merida. Merida—" She'd looked at him when he said her name, and he gave her an encouraging smile as he pointed at his dad. "Stoick."

"Merida," Stoick grunted, reaching across the table and offering his

hand. She put the spoon down and grasped the far larger hand firmly. With a nod she locked eyes with him and said, "Stoick." The exchange seemed to satisfy both of them; they tucked into their porridge without another thought.

Stoick paused to tell Hiccup, "After breakfast we'll go to the elder. She might know something." Merida's spoon clattered against the bottom of the empty bowl and he added, "She might not sound like one, but she eats like a Viking, at least."

* * *

><p>From near the top of the staircase Hiccup watched Merida, who stood brushing dirt from her dress conscientiously. He'd been able to change clothes, but she would have to go out in the same thing he'd found her in. He thought that there were still some of his mother's clothes stored in a chest somewhere, but even if he could bring himself to ask Stoick about them, he didn't believe any of the clothes would fit Merida. His own clothes would probably be betterâ€"except for the fact that they would definitely not fit in certain places, places where she curved that he did not, places he noticed as she twisted and caught up the hem at the back of her skirt. He pushed that particular thought from his mind and continued to watch her. Though small clouds of dust rose where she brushed, she didn't seem particularly bothered about the state of her dress. The same could not be said about when she dropped the skirt and touched her hair; that expression was nothing less than despair. Hiccup was glad he'd at least found something that she could use.

As if she didn't want to be caught in a moment of vanity, her hands dropped as he clattered down the stairs. He held out the carved wooden comb, its teeth spaced wide. A faint blush colored Merida's cheeks, and he immediately felt bad.

To cover her embarrassment, he'd embarrass himself, so he started to babble. "It belonged to my mother," Hiccup began, and got no further. Her eyes snapped up and she gasped.

"_MÃ thair?_" It sounded odd when she said it, the vowels shaped differently in her mouth, but not like when she'd repeated his words earlier.

"_MÃ thair?_" she asked again, looking around the hall. Hiccup shook his head. He remembered more of life without her than with her; he felt less sadness and more vague longing when he thought of his mother, wishing they'd had more time together, occasionally wondering if his life would be different if she'd lived. But the look on Merida's face, so full of pity and loss, made him wish his mother was there harder than he'd ever wished it before.

"No mother," he said quietly, hand tightening around the comb. "Not anymore."

She touched his arm, light and gentle, and he couldn't meet her eyes. Hiccup took a deep breath and opened his hand. The teeth of the comb left imprints in his palm. This time when he offered it she took it without hesitation, and set to work.

Combing it took longer than he'd expected, and even then he suspected she hadn't done a very thorough job of it. Once she'd finished she

handed the comb back reverently, and they headed out together.

When they emerged Toothless was lounging outside, evidently enjoying the sunshine. Merida stiffened as he rolled over, and Hiccup remembered that she couldn't have gotten a good look last night. Here his hide shone subtly, and his claws glinted when they caught the light; he looked sleek and dangerous and Hiccup felt a surge of pride. Was it possible that Merida had never seen a dragon before? The idea was hard for him to imagine, since everyone who lived in Berk had grown up surrounded by the creatures. It would explain her surprise, though. _Another question without an answer_, he sighed to himself.

"We're going to the great hall," he told Toothless. "It's up to you if you want to come or not." The dragon rose, stretched, and padded down the hill in front of them. Hiccup followed, but after a few steps stopped and turned.

She was still just outside the door, hugging the cloak around her as she stared. There was Berk before her: the slope that led down to the village and the wide sea slate grey beyond it. Long wooden halls with carved decorations, trees climbing the hill off to the left, gulls wheeling around a fishing boat by the docks, and dragons perched on rooftops or flapping lazily overhead: he smiled at the picture he saw. "Merida," he called, and waved her forward, and she took a deep breath, set her shoulders, and joined him.

3. Chapter 3

If Merida was nervous about entering the village, it didn't show. Hiccup was from Berk and he'd lost count of the times he'd been nervous, slinking down the hill and trying to avoid the gossip and mocking laughter after yet another embarrassing misadventure; but she only looked determined and proud, with posture straight as any sword Gobber had ever forged. She couldn't be a servant, he thought, because no servant walked so regally, head as high as if she wore a crown. Then again, with hair like that, there was no sense in trying to blend in. If Hiccup were better with words he'd be able to describe her hair in a way that didn't involve the sparks that leapt from the fire when a draft stirred it up, or the copper pots when they'd been scoured to like-newness before a feast. At least with her he didn't have to worry about saying the wrong thing.

When they reached the great hall Toothless ambled past, clearly not interested in their intrigues. Merida shot Hiccup a questioning look that he answered with a shrug. Sometimes Toothless wandered off, and Hiccup really didn't have any idea where he got to, though he never stayed away for very long. Since he couldn't explain all that, Hiccup flapped his arms and suggested, "Flying?" That seemed to satisfy her.

The elder was already there, along with Stoick, another of the village's oldest citizens, and Fishlegs, when Hiccup and Merida entered the hall. Their eyes latched on to the girl immediately—everyone knew everyone in Berk, and the old people had been present at most of the villagers' births, so a newcomer was easy for them to spot.

When Hiccup had started devoting more time to studying the law and

traditions of Berk, Fishlegs had joined him. It wasn't likely that Fishlegs would ever become chief, but then again it wasn't a foregone conclusion that Hiccup would automatically, either. Upon Stoick's death (which Hiccup hoped was far in the future, possibly after his own), a new chieftain would be elected after any candidates had passed certain tests. The tests were usually physical—they were Vikings, after all—though it was not uncommon for deliberations to take into account the candidates' knowledge as well. So Hiccup studied, thinking that if he did succeed his father, a thorough familiarity with the law would help. Fishlegs tagged along because he just liked learning. Of the two of them he had the better memory; he turned facts and dates into vivid pictures in his mind, and his enthusiasm encouraged Hiccup on the days when every word fought to flee from his brain. Hiccup would never admit it to anyone, but on the rare occasion that he daydreamed of leading Berk, Fishlegs was beside him as his most trusted advisor. The two nodded at each other now, before Fishlegs' attention went back to the source of the current mystery.

She stood next to him as Hiccup related the short tale of finding her and discovering that they spoke in different tongues. "But she understood 'mother,'" he concluded, "so I'm wondering if there are any other words that are similar between our two languages." From behind the elderly listeners Stoick looked hard at Hiccup, as if trying to figure out why that particular word had come up in conversation; Hiccup forced himself not to shrug.

The old man, now stooped, but who'd likely once stood as tall as Stoick, cleared his throat. "In my youth I traveled far, far beyond the seas we know here. I was counted a good sailor, but a master of learning other languages." Hiccup's heart rose as the old man talked. Maybe there would be a way to talk with Merida after all—

"But that was a long time ago," he went on. "I've forgotten more than many will ever know. If only she had come twenty years ago, I feel certain we could have spoken together easily."

"Will you try?" asked Stoick, arms crossed over his massive chest.

"Of course." The old man leaned forward, coughed hoarsely, wiggled a finger in his ear. Then he spoke—first in what sounded like the yips of puppies, then in fluid, rolling, liquid syllables, then in a sort of chant. As he continued, in what Hiccup frankly thought was just a bunch of gibberish, Merida listened politely, but it was clear that she understood as much as anyone else did. Finally, with a resigned shrug, he said, "Hm. That's all I can remember."

Hiccup's shoulders sagged; the exercise had been useless. "Thank you," Stoick said with a nod. "Even if we've not learned what language she speaks, we now know several that she doesn't understand. That will help narrow down where she might be from." Hiccup hadn't thought of it that way. His father managed to surprise him when he least expected it.

Hiccup pulled out his sketchbook. "This would be so much easier if she could, I don't know, write things out for me. Us."

"Where would the fun be if it was easy?" his father asked. Hiccup did not deign to answer, since an annoyingly large part of him agreed

with Stoick.

"Why not have the girl draw, then?" the elder suggested. "A map, perhaps."

"That's a great idea!"

"Don't sound so surprised, boy. You don't live to this age without learning something." His ears burned at the rebuke, but she laughed in a cacophony of wheezing and snorting. He moved to one of the long tables nearby and sat, laying the book open. Merida sat beside him, raising an eyebrow at the blank pages; he ignored her, drumming his fingertips against the tabletop and wondering how to begin. After a moment he sketched a small figure, skinny and with one artificial leg.

"Hiccup," she said, smiling.

"That's right." He added an overly round figure towering over the other, and she giggled slightly and said his father's name. Around the two he drew the outline of a house; then he sketched a map of the village and added the coastline, whose features he knew well from hours in the air. Last he drew a girl in a dress with curly hair, around the place where they'd found her. Merida pointed at the picture and then at herself, indignation on her features.

"It's just a quick sketch. You're obviously much prettier than that, I justâ€" She was smirking at him now, and he rolled his eyes. "Great. Somehow you've managed to tease me without saying anything. I'm not so sure I want to be able to talk to you now." She cooed and patted his cheek, and Hiccup thought that this was the moment in which he would die of embarrassment.

He cleared his throat and pointed at the drawing of their home before turning the page, pointing at Merida, and handing her the stick of charcoal. Her drawings were rougher than his, more stick figures, but he could tell they were herself, another woman, three figures of identical height with linked hands, and a large man with one peg leg. Hiccup looked at her sharply as she flipped back to his drawing. "Hiccup, Stoick," she said, pointing at each figure in turn, then, "Merida, Fergus. Athair."

"Father." If her father really looked the way she'd drawn him, it explained why she hadn't been afraid of Stoick, or bothered by Hiccup's leg. "Mother," he said, pointing to the woman, and she nodded sadly. "Elinor."

The woman was drawn with long, straight hair, but the man's was a frizzy mess, wilder than Merida's. Though it seemed fairly obvious whose hair she'd inherited, he still wanted to ask, so Hiccup tugged on one of her curls. "Fergus?" She nodded again, this time smiling a bit. "And three brothers." He'd always wondered it would be like to have siblings, though three brothers seemed maybe a little excessive.

Merida started to draw their home: instead of inside a house the family stood on top of a wall made of stone, to which she added more walls and towers. The surrounding area came next, but there was no coastline, only the tall, spiked triangles of trees, and rounded humps of hills. Her face was screwed up as she drew; finally she

dropped the charcoal with a shrug, apparently unable to add any more details. It wasn't much to work from.

After a moment he slapped his palm to his face and turned to his drawing. Circling the village with his finger, he said, "Berk."

She flipped the page. "DunBroch."

He turned back to the others, displaying her map. The elder said nothing, though the speculative look never left her face. "DunBroch? Never heard of it," the old sailor said, "but, y'know, we didn't always catch the local names on some of our moreâ€¦acquisitive expeditions." He peered at the map with rheumy eyes, and shook his head. "I'm better with coastlines."

"We all are," Stoick said, patting his shoulder gently. Hiccup turned to Fishlegs, now his greatest hope.

"Tell me you've got something, Legs," he pleaded. "Tell me you've got some clue."

Fishlegs ignored Hiccup for a moment as he paged through a thick book. Maps filled the pages, many of them with highly detailed coastlines dark with the names of ports, but interiors largely blank. Fishlegs glanced between Merida's map and those in the book. "Merida, is there a river near DunBroch? One with a source in the mountains and possibly emptying into a large lake?" They all stared at the top of his head until he looked up. "Oh, right," he said sheepishly. In one corner of her map he drew a wavy-lined river, with a fish in it for good measure, and then tapped the countryside she'd drawn. She took the charcoal, muttering to herself and shaking her head, and added a river; Fishlegs laughed triumphantly when it did indeed flow into the lake she'd drawn.

"I think," he announced, "that this is DunBroch." He held the book up so they could all see a map of a hilly place, complete with a little castle. Merida leaned forward for a closer look; her eyes ran over the drawing and she grinned and nodded eagerly, patting Hiccup's arm repeatedly in her excitement.

"Legs, you're amazing!" He should have known Fishlegs would find the answer. The other boy looked pleased.

"How far is DunBroch from here?" Stoick asked. Fishlegs pulled the book back to himself and flipped through it rapidly. Finally he showed them a page.

"Here's Berk," he said, pointing to an island all alone in the sea. Then he traced his finger down the page. It seemed to take a long time; Hiccup hoped the sea monsters drawn among the waves were fanciful fillers of space rather than real dangers. "And here's DunBroch."

There was little sense of scale on the map, but the two sites seemed far apart. He felt Stoick's eyes on him and answered the unspoken question. "It's hard to say, but it looks further than Toothless can fly at once. If there's no place to stop and rest in betweenâ€¦" Hiccup shook his head. For a second it had seemed like it was all worked out, and they'd be able to take Merida homeâ€¦not that he was particularly eager for her to leave; it was just obvious that she

missed her family, especially her mother. "We'll need a boat to go at least halfway, maybe more, before we can fly the rest of the way."

Stoick's expression was inscrutable. "Right. Why don't you boys show Merida the rest of the village?" he suggested, though it was clearly a dismissal. They gathered their things and left the hall for the sunshine outside. They'd figured out at least some of the puzzle, but they were no closer to being able to communicate with Merida, and Hiccup felt thwarted. Not for the first time he wished the Vikings had devoted more effort to writing things down than to fighting and plundering.

Fishlegs' voice whispering to him interrupted his thoughts as they wandered toward the village. "Does Astrid know?"

"Know what?" Hiccup asked, glancing at Merida.

"That she's here."

"It's Berk. I don't see how she doesn't know."

"About her staying with you, though?"

"I haven't seen Astrid since the day before yesterday." And at the moment he wasn't feeling that excited about seeing her any time soon. There certainly wasn't anything going on for Astrid to be jealous about—the slightly guilty twisting in his gut was just a habit, a physiological reaction born of years of screw-ups. Besides, it wasn't like he and Astrid were anything more than friends, one of whom occasionally kissed the other. Maybe the problem was that Hiccup had been waiting for Astrid to move their relationship forward, and she was waiting for him to do it—but that didn't make sense, because after growing up together, she ought to've known better. So maybe not doing anything more than sometimes giving him a kiss on the cheek was her way of letting things die a slow death?

Fishlegs raised an eyebrow, but made no remark. All he said was, "I'm gonna put these away. See you later." As he carried his armload of books away, Hiccup and Merida resumed walking.

"Hey, Hiccup!" At the sound of Snotlout's voice he stopped, groaning. Of the people he least wanted to deal with, Snotlout was almost always near the top of the list, to say nothing of wanting to spare Merida the experience. Hiccup turned as Snotlout caught up. "We've been out patrolling all morning. Are you going to do your part, or are you going to take it easy all da_hey_ there, pretty lady."

Snotlout was leering over Hiccup's shoulder at Merida. Hiccup could only imagine what her expression looked like; whatever it was, it had to be more attractive than Snotlout's. "Good morning, Snotlout."

As expected, he ignored Hiccup. "Who's this lovely young thing?"

Well, maybe everyone in Berk didn't know yet. "This is Merida. You might actually have a chance with her, since she doesn't understand our language."

Snotlout ignored (or failed to catch) the jibe, pushed Hiccup aside and grabbed Merida's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said in what he probably thought was a suave tone before he brought the hand to his lips and kissed it. Hiccup watched Merida's face as she tried not to tug her hand away. She managed a nod when Snotlout looked up at her, but it was nothing more than polite.

"What are you up to this fine day?" Snotlout asked Merida, still smiling smarmily. He crossed his arms over his chest in what Hiccup assumed was an attempt to make his muscles look bigger. His biceps were probably bigger than his brain, though.

"We were on our way to look for Toothless." At the dragon's name she nodded seriously, and Hiccup bit his lip to hide a smile. While Snotlout was confused, Hiccup reached down and snagged Merida's hand. "So we'd better get going, bye." He tugged gently and she spun to follow him away, leaving Snotlout glaring after them.

Even if he still had questions and concerns, Merida seemed more lighthearted now. She all but skipped down the packed dirt path, swinging their hands. Her happiness made it hard not to smile.

It was also hard not to talk, so he started pointing things out: the workshops, the houses, the people passing by. She didn't seem to be paying much attention to his talk, but he was used to that, and it didn't stop him. More than a few villagers stared at the strange girl with the red hair and then at him. He dropped her hand like it was burning, then tried to cover it by pointing at a bird. _Smooth_, he thought. _She definitely didn't notice that move_.

A sudden clang arose and out of habit he went to the forge, Merida trailing after him. "No, not that barrel, the other one!" Gobber bellowed inside. "Have I taught ye nothing?" He caught sight of Hiccup at the door and called, "How's your girl then?"

"See for yourself," Hiccup said, pulling Merida beside him.

Gobber came over with his usual racket of accessories and looked her over. "Is she still wearin' the same thing you found her in?"

"I guess? I mean, of course she is, you saw her. We're kinda busy trying to figure out how to get her home. Fashion isn't the priority."

"Obviously not for you. You might want to think about her comfort, though."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, thank you for your input."

"Beg your pardon, miss, Hiccup spends too much time with dragons and it makes him forget his manners sometimes. I'm Gobber." He extended his good hand.

"Merida," she said, shaking it.

"Merida of DunBroch, who doesn't understand our language," Hiccup clarified.

Gobber's brow furrowed. "DunBroch? How'd she get here?"

"That is yet to be determined."

"How're you getting her back?"

"Like I said: yet to be determined," Hiccup sighed.

"Well, come in," Gobber said, brushing Hiccup aside to pull Merida in to the smithy. He introduced the apprentices, and knocked them on the head when they stared at her too long; then he showed her the knives the boys were attempting to make and all the finished work around the shop, from ornate door hinges to a bucket full of unsharpened arrowheads. That sight elicited a smile that, while truly delighted, was far from innocent, and she started chattering away. When her words had no effect she sighed long-sufferingly, spread her feet, and drew back an invisible bow.

"Goatshanks across the way might have a bow," Gobber said, rubbing his chin before leading the way to the other man's shop. There followed a squabble between the two craftsmen, with Merida waiting impatiently and every so often glancing through the open door of Goatshanks' workshop, as if contemplating snatching a bow, permission or none. Finally he stomped into his shop and emerged with a bow and a quiver of arrows.

Merida took them carefully, running her hand down the length of the bow with a contented expression. Then she swung her head up and down the path. Seconds later an arrow was buried in the carved roof beam of a house halfway up the hill. Hiccup's mouth dropped open as she sighed happily.

Merida turned to the similarly gobsmacked Goatshanks and nodded solemnly before holding the bow out. "I'm not sure you should take that away from her," Gobber said slowly.

"A shot like that? I don't know if I feel more or less dangerous with her having it. She can keep it."

"Are you sure?" Hiccup asked, finding his voice. Merida hadn't made any attempts at violence, but he remembered the way she'd reached for a knife that wasn't there. "I'll pay you back for it."

Goatshanks shook his head. "Just keep her from shooting anyone."

Hiccup pushed Merida's hands back gently, and she drew the bow close to her chest, looking so hopeful that no one with a heart would be able to even think about taking it away again. He nodded, reassuring her; then before he knew what was happening—she was so quick; it kept taking him by surprise and it was getting embarrassing, a Viking being caught off-guard so often—her arms were around him and her hair was tickling his neck. She murmured something against his shoulder that he felt sure was thanks. The hug only lasted briefly before she released him, though that didn't stop the blood from rushing to his face as she threw her arms around the slightly terrified Goatshanks. From the corner of his eye Hiccup saw Gobber grinning knowingly.

"Well." When the craftsmen had gone back to their work, Hiccup rocked back on his heels. "Do you want to keep looking for Toothless, or do you want to go shoot?"

The options must have been obvious enough, so she cocked her head, considering. "Toothless," she decided.

"Yeah?" He couldn't help the smile on his face, and she nodded. As they walked a strange feeling that he eventually recognized as relief washed through him, though he wasn't sure why.

Of course, Toothless was nowhere to be found when someone was looking for him. The dragon always knew when he was needed in truly important situations, but if no one was in danger he took his time. They made their way through the village down to the very end of the docks, though Hiccup knew well that Toothless wouldn't be there.

While Merida stood, staring into the distance, the sea and sky shades apart at the horizon, Hiccup sat at the edge of the dock and let his legs dangle. After a moment she joined him, setting aside the bow and quiver before plopping onto the wood, swinging her feet above the water. Had she seen the sea before? According to the maps DunBroch was landlocked, though she must've seen the sea at some point on her way to Berk. He wished he didn't wonder things that he couldn't know the answers to.

She hummed softly next to him, her hands folded in her lap. "Water," she said, then spread her arms wide and said something that sounded like 'more.' "Toothless _mÃ³r_, water _mÃ³r_."

"Big?" Hiccup guessed. "Toothless is big, the water is big..." He grinned at her. "Stoick is big."

"Stoick big," she agreed.

He took a deep breath and ventured, "Fergus _mÃ³r_?" Merida clapped her hands together, and Hiccup tried not to look as foolishly pleased as he felt. Instead he kicked his foot toward the horizon and said, "Big water: sea."

"Sea. Sea, sea, sea. Sea, water, big." She turned to face him, with her eyes the color of the flashes of sunlight on the wavelets below, and opened her mouth to speak.

A rumble interrupted whatever she was about to say, and Hiccup threw his hands over his stomach as Merida laughed quietly. "Guess it's lunch time," he said, swinging his legs onto the dock. She hopped up lightly, but the hem of her skirt snagged on the wood and tore a bit. From his place on the ground, he reached over and unhooked the fabric. "And then we'll find you some new clothes after we eat."

He had one hand planted on the ground, ready to push himself up, when a gentle tug on his other hand made him pause. Merida held his hand firmly and pulledâ€"not raising him all on her own, but helping. Most Vikings would have pushed her away and declared that they didn't need anyone's help; most Vikings wouldn't have offered help, not out of cruelty, but out of respect for his pride and the expectation that he should be able to take care of himself. And he _could_ do it himself, and part of him really hoped no one was watching right thenâ€"he could imagine some of the things the twins and Snotlout would have to

say about itâ€"but he found himself not minding that much at all.

Though, since it was his life, he should have anticipated that they would both use too much force (Merida probably because she expected him to be heavier, and Hiccup because he didn't want her to think he was weak) and instead of standing gracefully he would stumble into her. In turn she stumbled backward, and he threw his free hand around her waist to keep her from falling. He chuckled awkwardly and she said something quietly, perhaps an apology.

Shouts in the village drew his attention away from her and up the hill. Hiccup stepped away from Merida as Toothless came into view, tearing between the houses and skidding to a stop on the dock. He dropped a bundle from his mouth and crouched in front of Hiccup. "What's up, Toothless?"

The dragon quivered with intense energy and flicked his eyes impatiently to the bundle. "All right, all right," Hiccup said, unwrapping the saddle and harness. He set to work, wondering what had Toothless so excited, and in a moment he was climbing astride. Only then did he remember Merida, now with the bow slung over her shoulder and the quiver in one hand.

"Merida, stay here," he ordered, pointing at the dock. Judging by her reaction, it was the wrong thing to say. Apparently hissing "_Ooooh_" was a universal female expression of anger, and it was followed by an animated rant in which she shrugged exaggeratedly, flung her arms at the village, shook her finger at him, and finally stomped her foot, eyes narrowed. There was only one thing to do in response to all that: he held out his hand.

She swung up easily, settling close behind him and putting her hands around his waist. As soon as she was situated Toothless took off running, and as he leapt into the air she squeezed tighter around Hiccup's middle.

Toothless flew purposefully, no wasted effort or showiness. Hiccup leaned along his back, with Merida following suit; it couldn't have been the most fun first dragon ride for her. When they were nearly to the spot where they'd found Merida Toothless dropped, somewhat suddenly, to just above the treetops. He slowed, gliding silently, and the two passengers peered downward.

Hiccup saw them first. Their ship was moored in a cove below the cliffs, almost out of sight, and they'd climbed up to a clearing. He counted quickly: there were at least a dozen of them that he could see, though there could be more in the trees. They hadn't made a fire, and he couldn't hear any noise, which meant they were trying not to be noticed. With so few, it seemed more like a scouting party than the beginnings of a raid. They had plenty of weapons, though. Like, more than enough of those.

Behind him Merida gasped. Her grip on him tightened again, and Hiccup felt her bury her head in his back. "Time to get out of here," he told Toothless, who turned and shot back toward the village.

* * *

><p>"Dad!" They burst into the great hall, Toothless pushing after

them.<p>

Stoick didn't look up from the papers spread in front of him. "I'm in the middle of something, Hiccup."

"Raiders. In the northeast. Close to where we found Merida." He glanced at her; her face was drawn and she clutched the quiver with white-knuckled hands. "I think she recognized them."

The chieftain stood. "How many?"

"I counted twelve, but there could have been more. And lots of weapons."

His dad wasted no time. "Right. Call the others. We'll fly together, then surround them once we're there. Hopefully they won't be expecting dragons. If they are..." He didn't have to finish the sentence; they both knew how bad it would be if the raiders were prepared for dragons.

Stoick strode toward the door and Hiccup hurried to catch up with him. "What about Merida, Dad?"

He stopped for a moment and spared a quick look at her. In the periphery of his vision Hiccup saw her stand up yet straighter at his father's scrutiny. Stoick shook his head briefly. "She has to stay. It's too dangerous to have someone we can't communicate with. It'll be safer if she's here." Decision made he departed, leaving Hiccup to try to explain.

Hiccup suppressed a sigh and turned to Merida, hoping this time she wouldn't demand to come along. She didn't look eager to go, though, instead giving him a half smile and pointing at the ground at her feet. Hiccup felt something in his chest lurch.

"Yeah. Stay here. Please," he added fervently. "I'll be back as soon as I can." There were too many answers left not to make it back.

"Hiccup," she said, and he paused. She laid her hand on his chest, over his heart, and said, "Big."

* * *

><p>Toothless led the way in silence only broken by the flapping of wings. Before they reached the raiders' camp they split up, Toothless breaking away to skirt below the edge of the cliffs, Thornado circling further down the coast to approach from the south, and Barf and Belch dropping low and continuing toward the camp. Hiccup wished Astrid had been around when they'd sounded the alarm. Awkward feelings or no, he'd rather have her than Ruffnut and Tuffnut, who were as liable to fight each other as their actual enemies. With any luck they'd be able to focus long enough to subdue the raiders.<p>

Toothless skimmed just over the water and close to the cliff's edge. When the ship came in range he shot a jet of fire, setting it alight instantly; raiders or not, Hiccup hoped no one had been on board. At least if their boat was destroyed they couldn't escape. As they rose over the top of the cliffs he saw that the other two dragons had

landed; green gas was trickling from the Zippleback's mouth, but it hadn't yet been ignited. The raiders were doing their best against the dragons, each of them fighting for himself, but they couldn't get close enough to do any real damage, and so far they were too disorganized to fight together.

"It's the white flag or the flame," Stoick called, "your choice." Having been on the wrong end of the flame Hiccup knew which he would choose, but these men were either far braver or rather stupider than he was, and they fought on, throwing spears and firing arrows that had little effect on the dragons. Hiccup understood now that dragons didn't necessarily want to kill, but if they were threatened they would defend themselves, and against humans their defense was disproportionate to the severity of the attack. Several raiders were brushed out of the way by tails and wings, landing far out in the sea or slamming into tree trunks; others leapt into the water themselves after flames caught their clothes and hair. In the end there were about a half a dozen who decided that they preferred to go on living and lay down their weapons.

Ruff and Tuff tied the survivors securelyâ€"for once their competitiveness worked in their favor, because they crossed the ropes excessively and tied more knots than were really necessary, each trying to outdo the otherâ€"and with a minimal amount of taunting. Barf and Belch caught the rope in its claws to carry the prisoners back to the village. Stoick cast an eye around the site of the brief battle, the ground littered with charred weapons and a few lifeless bodies. He sighed, heavily.

"You'd better get back, Dad. Make sure the twins don't 'accidentally' fly into any trees on the way."

"Are you sure? We have toâ€"|"

They had to bury the dead. They were Vikings, not total barbarians; even their enemies deserved a proper burial. "I'm sure. We've got it." He'd dig the holes, maneuver the bodies in, and cover them; then he'd gather the remaining weapons and Toothless would set fire to them. Any raiders who'd gotten away would come back to find a useless pile of molten metal.

Stoick nodded and climbed on Thornado's back. "Quick as you can. I don't want you getting caught out here alone if any of them come back." As the Thunder Drum rose into the air, Hiccup selected a large double-bladed axe and started digging.

5. Chapter 5

By the time he slid from Toothless' back in front of the great hall, the sun was setting. He was covered in dirtâ€"the axe hadn't been the most efficient digging toolâ€"his arms and back ached, and he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. His body begged to crawl into bed and sleep. Hiccup cracked his neck, rolled his shoulders back, straightened his spine, and tried to walk like he wasn't exhausted. He was, but he wouldn't show it if he could help it.

The captured raiders were now chained near the fire. Each man had a mug of water within arm's reach, and crumbs around them indicated that they'd been fed. Hiccup ignored the piteous growling of his

stomach as he walked further into the hall. He didn't see Stoick anywhere, though armed Vikings sat around the hall, keeping watch over the captives. Nor did he see Merida, and he hoped that his father had taken her home, or Gobber to the forge. He'd go home, then, and find her, and eat something.

As he skirted around the chained men, one of them chuckled. "You don't look like much of a Viking, boy."

"Tell me something I don't know," Hiccup muttered. The man regarded him with a disconcertingly shrewd look from beneath a head of matted hair.

"Who're you looking for? That girl?" Hiccup glared at the man, who laughed nastily. "She's not here. Hard to miss that hair, eh?"

Don't react. He's just trying to get you angry, get you to do something stupid that he can use to his advantage. Don't listen. Just walk away. It was harder than it sounded, now that he'd brought up Merida. He clenched his fists and tried to keep his cool. Maybe, just maybe, the man would say something of use.

"What do you know about her?"

The raider shrugged nonchalantly, producing a clinking of chains. "She belongs to us, boy. We took her fair an' square, and we'll get her back."

Another man put in, "Fought like a wildcat, that one did." Hiccup smirked briefly. "S'pose she didn't want to be kidnapped."

"Then why did you?"

"For the ransom, o' course." He said it in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone, as if kidnapping was the most natural thing in the world. "King Fergus would pay loads to get his oldest child back. Most parents would."

The first man looked Hiccup over skeptically. "Maybe not yours..."

Hiccup ignored the dig at him; he was focused on one particular word. "_King_ Fergus?"

"Yep. That girl's a princess."

The knowledge nearly set him reeling. It explained so much, it seemed so obvious now; he felt stupid for not having figured it out.

"Royal pain in the arse is what she is," grumbled a third man. "We should've beat her. Just a little, so she knew her place."

Hiccup lunged forward, stopping inches from the man's face. The man reared back in fear and shock. "You'll never lay a hand on her. If you try, you'll lose the hand."

"Someone's touchy," sniggered the man. "Don't worry, squirt, we didn't hurt the princess. Not any more than she hurt us, at least."

Hiccup resisted the urge to kick him, but just barely. "Shut up. Just...shut up," he muttered. "You're lucky I'm not letting her use you for target practice."

"Let women fight all your battles, do you?"

"What do you expect? He's not a whole man himself." The three of them laughed, but Hiccup felt much calmer now that they were mocking him. That was something he knew how to deal with.

So he took a deep breath and said, "Sleep well, boys. If you need anything, just ask Toothless." Right on cue a pair of glowing eyes appeared in the darkness, and at the prisoners' gasps Hiccup let himself smile as he walked away.

* * *

><p>Merida jumped up when he walked in. "Come here," he demanded, pulling her over to the table. He quickly sketched her family, to her puzzlement; then, with deliberate strokes, he added crowns to their heads. Hiccup jabbed his finger at the crowns. "Your fatherâ€"Fergus is a king? Your mother is the queen? And you're a princess?"

She looked somewhat abashed and shrugged one shoulder. Like being a princess was no big deal. Then she snatched the charcoal from his hand and drew Hiccup and Stoick, drawing a little crown on the latter. She raised her eyebrow, and he shook his head in return. He drew a crowd of Vikings pointing to Stoick, hoping that would illustrate the process.

"Are you just back?" Stoick asked, his footsteps heavy as he descended the stairs. He sounded tired; as he came into the firelight he looked it, too.

"I stopped by the great hall first in case you guys were there. Had a little talk with some of the raiders."

"Did you learn anything interesting?"

Hiccup scrubbed one hand through his hair. "Only that Merida's dad's the king of DunBroch and she was kidnapped for ransom." The girl in question sat looking suspiciously innocent but not particularly regal.

"I had my suspicions."

"Were you going to share them with me?"

"Eventually." Stoick walked into the kitchen and started clattering around there. It gave Hiccup an excuse to raise his voice to vent some of his frustration.

"I've just been treating her like a normal girl!"

"I'm sure she appreciates that."

"But I should have been treating her like a princess!" He threw his hands into the air.

"That's the best thing about you, son," Stoick said, setting stew and bread in front of Hiccup. "You treat normal girls like princesses and princesses like normal girls." He ruffled Hiccup's hair affectionately, patted Merida's shoulder, and left.

The stew smelled heavenly, a symphony of mutton and onion with a touch of mint making his mouth water. He jammed a heaping spoonful into his mouth and nearly moaned. Beside him Merida coughed delicately. "Sorry," he said, and then swallowed and apologized again. "Are you hungry?" he asked, offering the bowl, though he thought she'd probably already eaten. Sure enough she shook her head. Hiccup went back to eating, just as hungrily but more politely than before.

"Water?" Merida asked, hopping from her seat and walking backward into the kitchen, watching for his response. She got a lot of use out of that word; it made him glad she'd learned it.

With her watching him, an idea came to him. "Yes, please," he said, carefully not moving his head, to see what she'd do. She stuck her tongue out at him. As she spun around to fill the cups, he noticed that someone had done for her what he'd said they'd do hours ago: gotten her new clothes. Gone were the cloak and the fine embroidered dress; the one she wore now was a plain russet color and fitted more loosely than the other had, with a long brown apron over it, fastened below the shoulders with pewter brooches. If it weren't for the hair, she would have easily fit in in the village.

She certainly looked at home as she brought back the water, setting one cup before him firmly. "Thank you," he said, smiling, and she inclined her head graciously. "I like your new clothes." He plucked at the fabric at her wrist. She smoothed the dress down, seemingly pleased. "You look nice." Somethingâ€”the tone of his voice, suddenly heavy with tiredness, perhapsâ€”made her meet his eyes.

"I wish I knew what you were thinking." He laughed a little and added, "And I bet you wish you knew what I'm saying. Don't worry, it's nothing worth repeating." Even as the words left his mouth he had a feeling they weren't true.

A good intense yawn was interrupted by a knock at the door. Every feeling of contentment and goodwill leached out of his body as he trudged to the door, expecting the worst: that the captives had escaped somehow, or that another party of raiders was attacking. What he wasn't expecting was Astrid.

"You look terrible," she said when he opened the door. He glanced down at the state of his outfit, even more dirty than usual. He'd almost forgotten about what had caused it.

"Yeah. Bit of a busy afternoon," he said, standing aside to let her into the house. "Where were you? We fought off the raiders' scouting party."

She rolled her eyes. "A whole flock of sheep wandered off and Stormfly and I had to find them and then try to herd them back to the pasture. Do you know how stupid and stubborn sheep are? It was exhausting. How was the fight?"

"Not as bad as it could have been, thankfully."

"Oh, Hiccup," she sighed fondly.

"Hey, if I'd known the options were finding sheep or a skirmish with the raiders, I would've traded places with you."

"Snotlout won't shut up about some strange new girl in Berk who's supposedly totally beautiful. Have you seen her?"

Hiccup took a step back. Warnings that he had to tread carefully in answering flashed in his head. "Funny you should ask that..."

He led Astrid a few paces forward to where she could see where Merida sat at the table, flipping through one of his sketchbooks. "Astrid, this is Merida. Merida, Astrid."

"She's here?" Astrid looked less than pleased, eyeing Merida up and down. For her part, Merida smiled politely and studied Astrid's outfit for a moment before going back to the book.

"Toothless and I found her yesterdayâ€"was that only yesterday? The raiders took her from a place called DunBroch. Somehow she escaped, and when we found her she was nearly frozen."

"Huh." Astrid crossed her arms, eyes narrowed slightly as she turned over in her head what he'd said. "Why don't you know how she escaped? Hasn't she said?"

"She doesn't speak our language. We've figured out a few things through gestures and drawing pictures, but not much. The raiders might be able to tell us more tomorrow."

"That seems pretty convenient: find the lost girl, raiders show up. What if she's with them? What if they let her escapeâ€"_sent_herâ€"so that some sucker would find her and rescue her, and she can spy on them that way?"

Something of the sort (minus the sucker part) had crossed his mind; when Goatshanks had let her keep the bow Hiccup had thought that they probably shouldn't arm anyone they barely knew, especially when she was such a good shot. But she'd done nothing to deserve that kind of distrust.

Hiccup shook his head. "She's not with them."

"How can you be sure?" Astrid pressed.

He didn't want to mention the word princess, not yet, not to her. She would not take it as lightly as Stoick had. "I just am."

She looked at him with the cold anger that hurt worse than his father's blustery rage ever had. "You've done some dumb things in your time, Hiccup, but this might be the dumbest. I just hope it doesn't get all of us killed." She stalked away, into the indigo of twilight, and as the door swung shut it had a depressing air of finality about it.

Stoick glared at the captive scouts. Gobber and Spitelout stood behind him; the elder sat nearby, staff across her lap. Hiccup stood to one side of the group of Vikings, hoping to hear something of use. When he'd told Stoick that he wanted to be there, his father had looked at him with mild surprise. Belatedly Hiccup hoped that Stoick assumed it was because of his leadership studies, not because of anything else. At the far end of the hall Merida sat with Toothless and Gobber's apprentices, who appeared to be teaching her a game.

"How many were in your party? How many more ships do you have?" Predictably, none of the raiders answered. "Are you all deaf?" Stoick demanded. "I asked you questions, and I want answers!"

"Or what?" one sneered. "What are you going to do, feed us to your dragons? Or just use them to roast us alive?"

"We're good as dead anyway. There's no reason to tell some fat lump of a Viking anything."

Stoick changed his approach. "If anyone wants to be helpful, that man will get meat with dinner tonight. Otherwise it's porridge again."

"Stick your porridge where the sun don't shine, Yer Vastness. Give us the girl and a ship and we'll be on our merry way." This from the one who'd first spoken to Hiccup the night before, the one who seemed to be the leader of the scouts. Even though he knew Stoick wouldn't just hand Merida over to her kidnappers, Hiccup stiffened. Stoick's eyes slid over to him, which was bad enough; but apparently the raiders noticed it, too.

"Oho, loverboy won't stand for that, will he?"

"No, I won't stand for it," Stoick said impassively. "She's not yours to command."

"Nor yours!"

"I agree," the chief said, surprising the raiders. "The choice is hers. If she wants to take up with you, she's free to do so. But if she wants to stay, we will protect her 'til our last breaths."

Words like that came so easily to him. Hiccup doubted that he'd ever be able to say anything so convincingly. He could learn the law backward and forward, he could become the greatest strategist Vikingdom had ever known, but he didn't think he'd ever command respect with just a few phrases the way Stoick did.

"Fetch her, then, and let her decide."

Stoick called her name and Merida walked over. Hiccup stepped forward, trying to ignore the catcalls from the raiders, and joined her halfway between where the raiders were chained and where the Vikings stood. When he placed his hands on her shoulders, she pointed at the ground, looking up at him with a mischievous smile. Maybe she couldn't feel the slight tremble in his hands.

"Do you want to go with them," he asked, motioning toward the

captives, "or stay with us?" Hand over his heart he backed away, leaving her to decide and feeling oddly nervous, even though no one really expected her to choose the raiders.

Which was why they all gasped when, after a moment's contemplation, she walked toward them. The raiders cheered and hooted, rattling their chains. Hiccup couldn't believe his eyes. Astrid had been right after all. He'd never live this one down; he'd be the official laughingstock of the village. They'd probably make him wear a badge...

And then, with the same accuracy she'd shot with, Merida spat in the dirt between the chief raider's feet. _Three brothers_, Hiccup thought, grinning, as she turned her back on the chained men. She crossed to the Vikings and knelt before Stoick. With a small smile as tender as Hiccup had ever seen, his father lifted her up and put his arm around her shoulders.

"It was worth a try," the raider said.

"Hiccup, take her out of here," Stoick said quietly. "Go with Hiccup, Merida." She stepped forward and then curtsied to him; Hiccup whistled and Toothless bounded across the room.

"Boys, go on with them," Gobber called, and they whooped and ran eagerly for freedom.

Once they were outside she breathed a sigh of relief, and then thumped him on the arm. "Ow! What was that for?" he asked, rubbing the spot.

She babbled at him, waving her arm at the great hall, imitating the raiders as they mocked Stoick and then imitating Hiccup himself. Apparently he shouldn't have worried about what choice she was going to make. He was pretty sure he got called an idiot somewhere in her speech, too.

When she was done he rolled his eyes a little. "Whatever you say, princess." She thumped him again; he bowed elaborately and skipped out of the way when she tried to hit him a third time, this time laughing as he dodged.

"Hey, Squat. Go down to Goatshanks' and buy a dozen arrows. Tell him I'll pay him later. Wart, run up to my house and grab the bow and a quiver by the door." She hadn't wanted to leave them behind when they left the house, but Stoick had insisted, and she'd pouted all the way to the great hall. "Meet us in the arena."

The arena was empty, but luckily the targets and hurdles were set out. There was still a hatchet stuck in one of the targets, and as he pulled out she asked a question behind him. When he turned to look she mimed throwing it. Figured she'd want to see him do the thing he was worst at. Hiccup made a face; she nodded encouragingly. "Watch out," he muttered, squinting as he took aim. The hatchet at least thunked solidly into the wood, though nowhere near the center of the target. Merida's face was a reflection of his earlier one, and he stuck his tongue out at her.

"Hiccup!" Wart called from above, holding up the bow and quiver.

"Bring them in," Hiccup said just before an arm wrapped around his neck with more words of thanks. Merida raced to meet Wart at the entrance and cuddled the bow, cooing to it happily. Squatwiggles joined them, the extra arrows bundled in one hand and a sack in the other. From it he withdrew a sweet bun.

"Told the baker you'd pay him back, too," he said cheekily, handing a bun to Wart. When he offered one to Merida she shook her head, tapping at the bowstring.

"Can't get the string sticky," Wart admonished around a mouthful of bun, and Squat dropped it back in the sack. "We'll hold on to it for you."

Hiccup motioned to the arena. "It's all yours." She curtsied with a smile.

Toothless was perched on the edge of the wall at the top of the arena, with the boys close by. Hiccup dropped down next to the dragon. "Thanks for doing all that. I guess you can go home if you want."

As one they shook their heads. "We want to see."

"Gobber said she's good." They handed him the sack and Hiccup munched his bun, waiting for Merida to reappear in the arena.

When she did her hair was plaited haphazardly down her back, and she'd rolled up her sleeves. She walked to the center of the circle and rotated, marking where all the targets were. She nocked an arrow, breathed deeply, and fired. Squat and Wart cheered when the arrow landed near the center, but she shook her head. Before she grabbed the next arrow she rolled her neck and shook her arms, loosening up, and the arrow she fired slammed into the center, as did those that followed. Only when all of the arrows were seated in bull's-eyes did she smile, fierce and proud.

She collected the arrows and shot again and then a third time, each shot coming quick on the heels of the previous one; the targets weren't much of a challenge to someone as good as her. After she'd gathered the arrows up again she paused for a moment, examining the arena with a calculating eye. Then she called, "Toothless," and he perked up, cocking his head. She said something and waved, and he waddled down into the arena. Hiccup leaned against the chains that domed the arena, wondering what she was up to, as below them she scratched Toothless' head, speaking to him in a low voice. Her finger traced a ring in the air, and she pointed at the targets. Hiccup hoped she wasn't suggesting what he thought she was suggesting.

She was. She clambered onto Toothless' bare back and settled into position, which involved hiking the skirt up around her knees. Hiccup was sure he'd been about to say something, but all of a sudden he couldn't remember what it was. Before he could remember what it was she poked her heels into Toothless' sides and he started pacing around the perimeter of the arena, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to check on her. At Merida's urging he quickened his stride to a trot. She laughed, bouncing on his back as she rode; then she raised her bow and shot at a target on the wall opposite her. The shot was wide, landing on the edge of the target, but she seemed more

than pleased with the new challenge and swiftly loosed another arrow. Eventually Toothless slowed when she'd fired her last arrow. Merida leaned forward, lying along Toothless' back, arms spread wide around his neck. Even when he stopped and lay down she stayed there, smiling happily.

Wart and Squat ran around the arena to pull the arrows from targets as Hiccup went to check on Toothless and Merida. The dragon opened one eye and snorted at Hiccup, so he moved around to Toothless' side. "You okay, Merida?"

She opened her eyes and gazed down at him, smiling. "Yeah, you're fine." He smiled back and leaned against Toothless, arms crossed. She petted Toothless' side, sighing and murmuring. Then she sat up, swung one leg over his back, and slid down. Apparently the circuits around the arena had made her unsteady, though, because as soon as her feet touched the ground she swayed. With the hand not occupied with equipment she reached out to steady herself; the closest thing was Hiccup, and she caught his bicep, shutting her eyes until the feeling subsided.

"Dizzy, huh?" This close he could see the faint dusting of freckles, the red-gold of her eyelashes against her cheeks. There was a faint pink in her pale cheeks; the fingers around his arm were long and elegant, but he'd watched her shoot and knew how strong they were, how calloused they must be. Curls were escaping from the braid and twisting around her face. If he stared at her hair for too long, burnished in the sunlight as it was, the ghost of it would be there when he closed his eyes.

Like he would forget it anyway.

* * *

><p>Stoick answered the knock at the door and showed Fishlegs in.
"Hi, Merida. Hi, Hiccup."<p>

"Hey, Fishlegs. What's up?"

"I had an idea." He held up a bookâ€"not one of his usual ones, but a board book bound with loops of twine. A book for a toddler.

He put the book in front of Merida, who opened it curiously. On the first page there was a duck, painted in yellow that once had been vivid but had faded over time. "It was one of my first books," he admitted to Hiccup. He slipped a blank page from the back of the book as he told Merida, "Duck." When she'd repeated it a few times he pointed at her, and wrote down the word she said, or the closest he could get.

Realization slowly dawned on Hiccup. "You're starting a dictionary." Good old Fishlegs. "That's great."

"Thanks. Now at the very least well be able to discuss animals. That will be really helpful." He spoke self-deprecatingly, as if he hadn't thought of something no one else had.

"Really, Legs, I mean it. It's a fantastic idea." Fishlegs smiled, ducking his head, as unused to true praise as Hiccup himself was.

Hiccup knew he should listen and learn along with them, but in all honesty he was thrilled that someone else was talking with Merida. The struggle to make himself understood was draining. He couldn't imagine how she felt, a stranger in a place she literally couldn't understand. If he'd learned anything important about Merida it wasn't that she was a princess, or that she'd be able to kill him before he had the chance to beg, or that she blazed like a star; it was that she had a spine of iron, a will too strong to break. She'd found a way to escape her kidnappers and then spit at their feet for good measure. Maybe in DunBroch queens were supposed to be more refined than that, but he'd have her as chieftain of Berk in a heartbeat.

For a moment he tried to focus on their words, how she said cat or horse, but even Fishlegs' syllables ceased to make sense. He let them slide over him and pass by, background noise to the scrape of his charcoal over the page.

7. Chapter 7

In the great hall an impassioned debate was raging. Escorted by Stormfly, Barf and Belch, and Astrid and the twins, the captives had been taken down to the arena for a chance to stretch their legs and get some fresh air; in the meantime, the Vikings were discussing what to do with them. "We can't let 'em go!" Spitelout cried. "They know where we are, they know what we have, and they know about the dragons."

"If we let them go, they'll use all that against us."

Gobber scoffed. "So we kill them in cold blood? That's murder. If they'd died trying to invade, that'd be one thing, but we don't just murder people. You know that."

"What else can we do? Either we kill them, set 'em free, or keep 'em locked up forever. If they're dead they can't fight us again, and I'm not feedin' 'em for the rest of their worthless lives." Spitelout crossed his arms defiantly, and other Vikings muttered their agreement. He had a point: Berk was only so big, and some years the village struggled to feed everyone. Adding six more mouths—"six loud, obnoxious mouths"—probably wouldn't cause any catastrophic consequences, but was it worth the lives of villagers to test that theory?

At the same time, Hiccup knew Gobber was right. The scouts that were left had survived and chosen to surrender under the assumption that they'd be treated fairly. Killing captives couldn't be right.

"If they don't come back, won't the others come looking for them?"

He hadn't realized he was going to say anything until the words had come out of his mouth and everyone was staring at him. In the past he would've flinched and shrunk under the scrutiny, played his question off as stupidity, and he still wanted to, especially when faced with Spitelout's sneer. But there hadn't been anything wrong with his question, only in who'd asked it, and he refused to back down just because Spitelout of all people had a low opinion of him.

"It's possible," Stoick answered.

"Or it's possible that they won't care and will leave us alone."

"They're raiders. They'd slaughter their own mums if there was any profit in it."

"There's precious little worth a profit in Berk," Gobber said. At Stoick's glare he challenged, "What? Strike me dead if I'm lying."

"Little worth a profit except the dragons," Hiccup said grimly.

"Or the girl. They said themselves they'd leave of they got her."

"Surely you don't believe that. We give them Merida and they go home nicely? Not likely." Stoick spoke to Spitelout like he was a particularly dimwitted child, which Hiccup didn't think was far from the truth, at least at the moment. "Besides, the girl's not one of them. They kidnapped her. She's had the chance to choose whether she'd rather go with them or stay with us, and she chose Berk. I'll not hand her over now."

Spitelout's face was mutinous, but at the chief's tone, or perhaps his stony expression, he made no more protest. "That still leaves the question of the scouts," Stoick went on. "Any ideas that _aren't_ about killing them?"

The old sailor staggered to his feet. "Maroon 'em," he rasped. "Stick 'em on an island somewheres. They get off, more joy to 'em; they die, it's their fault."

"Send them to Dragon Island!" someone yelled, to general assent, but Gobber snorted.

"And have them learn to ride, or smash the eggs? Kill the young ones? No."

"There are other islands, to the north. We'll take them there, give them a few days' food and a knife or two, and tell them they're dead if they ever set foot on Berk again. Agreed?" There was a chorus of ayes to the chief's question. "Then let's get to work."

The next morning the captives were again bound in ropes and blindfolded. Hookfang carried them, while a barrel of water swayed under Toothless, and a large sack of bread, much of it already stale, sat behind Stoick on Thornado's back. The villagers, Merida among them, watched them take off toward the north, Thornado leading the way. Merida had been staring, more solemn than anyone around her; when Hiccup looked back he saw Fishlegs trying to lead her away, but she shook her head and stayed, watching them fly into the distance.

The island was small, with scrubby trees on mostly rocky ground. It wasn't pretty, but they'd be able to build a fire and maybe even a small raft. The boys untied the blindfolds as Stoick explained to the raiders what was happening and how they'd be punished if they ever

returned to Berk. The leader nodded, apparently approving of the situation, but one of the scouts balked.

"You're leaving us to get et by dragons, that's what this is! Call that fair?"

"Don't worry," Hiccup reassured him, "dragons don't eat garbage."

"You've got bread, fresh water, and a knife. Your fate is now in your hands."

As they returned to the dragons one of the raiders yelled, "Where's the knife?"

"D'you think I'm an idiot?" Hiccup heard Stoick mutter as he swung astride Thornado. Only then did he toss the knife into the ground at their feet. "Stay away from Berk," he said, and they took to the air again.

* * *

><p>Fishlegs and Merida were sitting outside their house when the dragons landed. They both stood and waited as father and son undid straps and removed saddles.<p>

"She didn't want to do anything but wait for you to come back," Fishlegs explained. Her face was still serious, and her hands twisted in the apron (this one blue; it suited her). She gazed steadily at Stoick, who nodded down at her. Merida let out a breath and took his hand, kissing it; he looked taken aback, then swept her up into his arms. She stretched her arms as far around him as she could, sniffing against his chest, and Hiccup wondered when the last time she'd hugged Fergus was.

After a moment, during which Hiccup barely stifled his laughter at Fishlegs' wide-eyed amazement, Stoick set her down and coughed. For her part, she grinned, albeit with watery eyes.

"Come in, Fishlegs. We need to talk about taking the princess home," Stoick said, and swept into the house. Fishlegs followed, still agog, and Hiccup let himself chuckle.

"We'd better go in," he said. "After you, Your Highness." He bowed, one hand at his waist and the other flung into the air, to let her enter before him; he heard her huff, and then her fingers twined with his and she pulled him, stumbling, into the house.

Because he was always left behind, he hadn't ever had to put much thought into organizing an expedition. Now he was learning that it was easier said than done. There were maps and tide charts to consult, food and clothing to prepare, volunteers to recruit, boats to inspect. Fishlegs was tracing a route on a map, Stoick nodding. The latter looked up, his glance taking in their joined hands, at which Hiccup's ears started to burn; if Merida noticed she made no sign, but dropped his hand to climb onto the bench.

"The currents should be in our favor on the way back, at least," Fishlegs said.

"Good. We'll be without the dragons then, and the faster we can get back, the better."

"Dragons?" Hiccup asked. "Who else is going?"

"I don't know." Stoick scratched at his beard. "I can't leave the village, not when raiders might return."

Fishlegs' expression was apologetic. "I'd go, but Meatlug can't keep up with Toothless." Hiccup knew that, but he wished all the same that if someone had to go with him, it would be Fishlegs.

"Do we need anyone else to go, though? You said yourself, the raiders might return; shouldn't the others stay here to help defend Berk?" It was kind of a low blow, appealing to his duties as the leader of the village, and he saw the conflict between chieftain and father on Stoick's face.

"The raiders know they've lost the princess, though. They'll be looking for her, and we don't know where they might be. It'll be safer for the both of you if you're not alone."

Pushing Stoick was a risk, he knew; but the other option was traveling with one or both of the twins, Snotlout, or Astrid. He hoped he wouldn't have to explain why none of those were attractive prospects. "But can you justify putting the safety of two people—only one of them actually a villager, the other one a stranger—over the safety of everyone else? What'll Spitelout have to say about that?"

Stoick sighed. "Hiccup—" He rubbed a large hand over his eyes. "Sometimes I wonder how I had a son so devious. You're right, Spitelout wouldn't like it. And in a perfect world, we wouldn't have to worry about attacks or kidnappings or any of that. But you're my son, and I'll do anything to protect you."

"I know, Dad."

He leaned forward across the table and lowered his voice. "And to be honest, I'm a little concerned about the two of you being alone together, for who knows how long. I know you're a good boy, but—" He trailed off, embarrassed.

"_Dad!_" Hiccup hissed. His eyes shot to Merida, who was watching him with interest, and then Fishlegs, who was either really into his book or pretending to be. He'd never been happier that Merida couldn't understand what they were saying; otherwise he would have died of utter humiliation. All the same, he hid his face in his hands. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Well, you're a man now, and she's a lovely girl—"young woman. It's natural that you should feel certain—"

"No no no I am not hearing this." Hiccup threw his arms over his head, wishing he could disappear. "It's not like that. And even if I wanted it to be like that, which I'm not saying I do, there's no reason she would want anything like that, not with me, and _oh gods Fishlegs can understand all of this_."

Fishlegs snorted, quietly. "I can leave if you want," he said

mildly.

"No, it's too late. The damage is already done." He sat up and scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to look any of you in the eye again, but stay." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Merida biting her lip with a furrowed brow, but there was no way he was going to look at her now.

Stoick looked contrite. "I'm sorry, son."

"Don't be. You're right. I mean, not really, but if you think someone else needs to come along, I understand."

His father studied him for a moment. It came to him suddenly that for all the times he'd wished Stoick would look at him, he'd never really looked at Stoick. There was silver at his temples and in his beard; the lines in his face were deeper than they appeared at first glance. But Hiccup remembered the smile that had caused those lines, and he recognized now the sense of responsibility, of duty, of worrisome care that brought out the grey hair. "Are you sure you can do it alone?" Stoick asked.

Viking pride all but demanded he say yes, but this was a time for truth, not bravado. He took a minute to think before he answered. "No. I'm not sure. But I think we have a good chance. Do you think we can do it?"

"I've trusted Toothless with your life more than once; another time won't hurt. And I hear the princess is quite the archer."

He smiled at the understatement. "She is."

"I do think you can do it, Hiccup. Together I think you'll be safe." He wouldn't say it if it wasn't true; he really trusted Hiccup not to get them all killed. Hiccup knew his father's opinion of him had changed over the years, that he no longer had to feel like the changeling of the village, but he didn't mind being reminded of it.

His smile grew wider as excitement started to well up within him. "So what's our route, Legs?"

8. Chapter 8

The following days were filled with packing and provisioning. A smallish ship was selected and a crew found; the boat was filled with hard bread and dried meat and barrels of water. Gobber and his apprentices sharpened arrowheads and Goatshanks' workshop produced more fletched shafts and fitted the heads in. Merida bundled her few dresses into a sack, and managed to secure a waterproof bag for the bow. Fishlegs and Hiccup made copies of maps, indicating the intended route and possible alternates, and in the evenings they added more words to the dictionary—geographical terms and the directions seemed important to know now.

As they bickered over one of Merida's drawings one evening, Stoick came in and handed her a package. "I thought this might come in handy," he said. She untied the twine and pulled out a long tunic the

color of spring leaves, then one sky blue; after that came a short skirt not unlike Astrid's and two pairs of brown leggings. Finally there was a leather belt and a pair of boots. She looked at the clothes for a beat; then, without any urging, she raced up the stairs.

The girl who descended looked dangerous—or would have, had it not been for the grin on her face. Her new clothes were snuggier than the dresses she'd worn; Hiccup assumed that they were meant to be easier for her to move in, and she seemed comfortable enough, though, after their earlier discussion, he was surprised Stoick had gotten the things made quite so fitted. Merida pirouetted, talking as she did, something about her mother. She thanked Stoick with a kiss on the cheek.

Then the day to leave came, and a small crowd assembled on the dock. Toothless butted Stoick affectionately and bounded onto the boat as the others said their goodbyes. As Hiccup rechecked the bundle with his tools, Gobber cuffed him on the head. "I've watched you check it three times already. It's still all there."

"Any words of advice before we go?"

Gobber cocked his head, jutting his jaw out as he thought. "Just be yourself," he said finally, and chuckled at the look on Hiccup's face.

"Good luck," Fishlegs said.

"Thanks for all the help, Legs. We couldn't have done it without you." They exchanged a manly hug before Merida latched onto Fishlegs, squeezing him tightly. He blushed happily and hugged her back.

Wart handed her a bundle wrapped in only slightly dirty linen. "We made it all ourselves," he said.

"Gobber supervised, is all," Squat added.

Unwrapped it was a knife in a scabbard. A dragon just below the leather-wrapped hilt breathed fire down the length of the blade, and the scabbard was decorated with a sun on one side and a cluster of stars on the other. Merida's chin wobbled as she smiled, and she pulled the two boys close, depositing kisses on their cheeks. They blushed and blustered, but their efforts to escape were unconvincing.

When they'd scampered out of the way, Stoick looked down fondly on Merida. Maybe he'd wanted a daughter, too, Hiccup thought as she jumped into his arms and he held her close, both of them saying quiet things that the other didn't understand. He set her down and wiped his eyes quickly. Then Stoick turned to his son.

"Be safe," he said, setting a heavy hand on Hiccup's shoulder. "Watch out for her and Toothless and the others. And watch out for yourself."

"I will. You, too, Dad. Thanks. For all this—everything." Stoick nodded. "I love you."

"I love you, too, son." _This won't be the last time I hear that_,

Hiccup promised silently as he hugged his father, eyes closed tight.
This won't be the last time I see you.

The ship moved from the dock with a great cheer. Three figures stood watching, two in the ship and one on the dock, until they couldn't see each other anymore.

* * *

><p>Hiccup had never understood the appeal of long sea voyages. At their best they were boring, only the flash of sunlight on the water for variety; at worst they were deadly, full of storms and shipwrecks and sea serpents. And yet there were men who weren't happy unless they were on the water, who felt less than whole on land.<p>

Though maybe if all voyages were like this one, it wouldn't be such a bad life. The salt air filled his nostrils with every breath; Merida clung to the carved prow of the ship like a red-haired figurehead. On the second day Hiccup took a turn at the oars, giving one of the men a brief rest and tearing the skin on his hands. Much to the men's amusement Merida also demanded a turn; she pulled steadily, muscles straining in her slim arms. The next morning Hiccups arm's burned. If Merida's did as well, she made no mention of it. Toothless took short flights every so often, lightening the load for the crew and supplementing their stores with fresh fish. The men appreciated his efforts, except when he rained eels on their heads, snickering.

A few days into the voyage one of the men devised a way to ward off Merida's boredom. He lowered the ship's coracle into the water and plopped the girl into it, handing her one end of a rope. The other he threw to Toothless, who caught it in his claws as he kept pace with the ship off the port side, Hiccup lounging on his back and frankly not paying very much attention. The dragon looked from the rope he held to Merida at the opposite end, sitting in the little boat. Without warning he surged forward, catching both Hiccup and Merida off guard; he sat up abruptly as with a shriek she flew out of the coracle and landed in the water with a splash.

Hiccup leaned over, reaching for the end of the rope to haul Merida up, while the sailor grabbed the coracle before it drifted away. She surfaced, shaking hair and water out of her eyes and spluttering with laughter. Toothless flew higher, lifting her out of the water, and Hiccup sighed with relief.

"Thanks, bud," he called, expecting Toothless to lower her into the ship. Instead he maneuvered her into the now-upright coracle.

"No. Merida, get back in the ship right now," Hiccup said sternly, shaking his head.

She scowled at him and then grinned at Toothless.

"Don't you dare, Toothless," he warned, but Toothless ignored him in favor of looking down at Merida. She looped the rope around the coracle's seat and held onto both ends, her feet braced against the boat's sides, and nodded up at Toothless.

"I'm so glad I'm on this trip with people who listen to me and respect my opinion," Hiccup said flatly, resigned to being ignored.

This time the little boat skipped forward over the water and Merida whooped with delight.

When Toothless finally tired of flying he towed the coracle back to the ship. He lifted Merida and the coracle into the ship and then landed on the stern, letting Hiccup slide off and remove his saddle. Merida joined them, hugging Toothless in thanks. Her hair and clothes were still damp from the unexpected dip, and she shivered slightly even as she beamed.

"I'm not giving you back to your parents sick. That'd make a great first impression." Hiccup grabbed a blanket and threw it over her head, rubbing it briskly to indignant and increasingly physical protest. When a fist hit his stomach he gave in with an "Oof," letting her pull the blanket off. What emerged was an annoyed expression under a seriously disheveled head of hair. He whistled. "Wow. I didn't know hair could get that big."

Merida glared and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. She stomped to her bundle and rummaged through it, then stomped back to where Hiccup stood. She sat heavily, her back to him, and held up the comb. When he didn't take it right away she twisted to give him a black look. "Right. Combing now."

He would later look back on that time as one of the most arduous parts of the journey. The combination of Merida's curls, the salt water, and his vigorous drying method had produced knots the likes of which he had never encountered before. "How does one person have this much hair?" he grumbled, trying to overcome a particularly big knot without actually pulling the hair out of her head.

"Put yer back into it, Hiccup!" one of the sailors called, and the rest laughed. He probably should have been embarrassed about being caught doing a woman's task, or obeying one so easily. But while he could deal with the laughter, he wasn't sure he could deal with her anger if he didn't do as she wanted.

It seemed like hours before her hair was tamed. It was mostly dry by that time, and a bit stiff from the salt, but there were no knots and it was curling softly. Hiccup collapsed melodramatically on the deck, his fingers throbbing. "I've learned my lesson," he said, cradling his hands, still locked around the comb, on his chest. "I'll never mess with your hair again."

She answered and patted his hands, plucking the comb from him to run it through her hair; she nodded, apparently satisfied with his work, and Hiccup watched her as she twisted the hair into braids. Thisâ€"sailing on a gentle sea, playing with Toothless together, learning new things (even to the detriment of his fingers), growing drowsy tracking the movement of the strands of her hairâ€"was nice. If the whole trip went like this he would have nothing to complain about. He didn't expect the tranquility to last, though; something eventful was bound to happen sooner or later. And even if it didn't, even if they made it to DunBroch unscathed, he'd have to leave her. So he let his eyes close on the sight of her, and he imagined fingers running through his hair as drifted off to sleep.

They sailed for nine days before the captain called for the men to drop their oars. By all their calculations they should have been within flying distance of land, though the horizon was as featureless as it had been for the past week. If their figures had been wrong, it would mean a watery death for all three; but there was nothing to do but try.

Hiccup checked the extra straps where they hooked onto Merida's harness for a third time before she gently swatted his hands away. The sailors handed up their sacks as Toothless wiggled impatiently.

"Good luck," the captain said.

"Same to you." Hiccup sketched a salute before patting Toothless' neck. "South, bud," he said, and they took off.

This was not like racing across the island, or swooping between the rocks in the bay. This was, without a doubt, the most boring flight he'd ever had with Toothless. Sure, the dragon sometimes rose sharply to ride down an air current, but there was no unnecessary motion. Not that Hiccup wasn't grateful for Toothless' skill; he supposed he was just spoiled by all of their previous excitement together. Now Merida napped behind him as they flew and Hiccup stared at the horizon until it blurred and swam before his eyes. In the afternoon he was slumped forward, memorizing the patterns on Toothless' hide and wondering how much longer it would be before he went crazy.

A short nap held madness at bay until he woke to Merida shaking him and calling his name. She leaned over his shoulder and pointed excitedly as he rubbed his eyes. There was a dark stain far off at the edge of the sea; Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, and it was still there.

"D'you see that, Toothless? Land." Toothless nodded shortly and carried on as he had done for hours, but Hiccup felt immensely more cheerful.

It was completely dark when they landed. Toothless, deservedly exhausted, stood until Hiccup had removed the saddle, and then collapsed, rolling halfheartedly for a moment. He ate a few salt fish and drank a bit of water and promptly fell asleep. "So I guess this is camp for the night," Hiccup said.

He piled their equipment near Toothless' head, figuring it was the safest place for it all. Merida was yawning and he fought not to join her; instead he gently extended Toothless' wing and showed her where to sleep. The wing would act as both camouflage and insulation during the night. While she settled down cuddled against Toothless' side, he sat by the dragon's feet, intending to stay on watch for a while. But the night was quiet and calm, and Toothless' steady breathing and familiar bulk soon lulled him to sleep.

He woke to an unwelcome light mist on his face. Toothless was still asleep, steaming slightly; when he peeked under the wing Merida was both asleep and completely dry. Before he could think better of it Hiccup burrowed under the canopy of the wing and drifted off again next to Merida.

The second time he woke because Toothless moved. One minute he was in a snug, warm, dark place; the next he was exposed, that mist covering him. He groaned and flung an arm over his face, listening to the sounds of Toothless moving away, followed by a splash. Hiccup sat up, groaning again, and then went to rummage through their packs for the waterproof cloaks there. It looked like they'd be coming in handy. Behind him Merida sat up suddenly. He glanced over his shoulder; she was looking around wild-eyed, like she didn't know where she was. She probably didn't, for that matter.

"Good morning," he said, tossing her a cloak. "Hope you slept well."

She grumbled something in return and pulled the hood over her head as he saw to it that their store of bread didn't get soggy. Toothless returned, dropping a mouthful of fish on the ground and lighting a small fire before wandering off again to get his own breakfast. Once Hiccup's belly was full of roasted fish he felt much more prepared for the day; Merida too looked more alert and less murderous.

To let Toothless rest they walked, the bags over the humans' shoulders. They'd landed on an island—that was obvious, as it was bare of any trees, just rolling hills covered in grass. They plodded on and on, climbing small slopes and sliding down the other sides, hopping over ditches filled with water, and seeing nothing but rabbits hopping away from them. No one spoke as they went; the mist never dissipated, and occasionally it turned to actual rain. Hours passed with the only sound their feet squishing over the damp ground.

They walked as far south as they could, down a narrow spit of land. In the distance, over the grey water, there was a dark spot that may have been another island. At the sight of it Toothless snorted, shaking water from his snout, and turned back, walking a few paces the way they'd come. He breathed fire on the wet ground and turned a circle before settling down. Hiccup looked at Merida, huddling miserably in her cloak, and pulled her to Toothless' side. The dragon lifted a wing and they leaned their backs against him, side by side under the shelter of his wing.

* * *

><p>The next morning they flew the short distance to the next island and walked across it, then repeated the process on the subsequent island. Each day Toothless was able to fly a little farther; by the afternoon of the fifth day Hiccup felt confident that they'd made it to the mainland, wherever that was. Soon they alternated flying and walking. As they made their way further south and further from the coast there were more trees. The presence of the trees made everyone happier: Hiccup and Toothless because of the protection from the elements, and Merida for some reason he didn't understand, though he took it as a good sign. In the evenings, after they'd made camp, Hiccup would tend the fire while Merida and Toothless hunted. Usually they returned with at least some rabbits or fish, but one evening they came back triumphantly with a deer over Toothless' back, an arrow through its heart.<p>

The forest here wasn't much different from the ones at home, but it wasn't much the same, either. There were trees that didn't grow at home and strange birds sat in them, which he expected, but in some

indefinable way it all just felt different. He'd never imagined that he wouldn't feel at home in a forest, and it reminded him of how far from home he really was.

* * *

><p>As they flew on the seventh day, Hiccup tried to orient them with Fishlegs' maps. It was a little difficult to hold the map and look at the land below at the same time, but he managed. When they made camp that night he pulled out his sketchbook and updated the map, sketching in all the details he could. He leaned back against a tree trunk, turned to a fresh page, and began a map of the islands; after a few minutes he closed his eyes, picturing the islands beneath them as he tried to remember how many they'd crossed.<p>

He woke to the smell of roasting rabbit and Merida holding the sketchbook, flipping through it idly. She sat in front of the fire and a bit to his left; he could just make out the drawings and notes on the pages as she turned them, not spending too long looking at any one thing. Until she reached a recent page and stopped.

"Um," he said, sitting up abruptly. The Merida he'd drawn leaned on the bow planted in the ground. She was in the dress she'd been wearing when they first found her and her hair hung in the plait over her shoulder; even though all he had was charcoal, he'd still tried to show the way the sunlight made her curls glow. Her expression was content, though her eyes looked far off into the distance. In his own opinion, it was one of the best things he'd ever drawn. He hoped she agreed. Merida bit her lip as her eyes raked over the drawing. She didn't seem about to hit him, but he'd been wrong about that so many times before.

Hiccup opened his mouth, but none of his words would mean anything to her. Anyway, there was nothing to explainâ€"it was right there on the page for her to see. She stared, tracing the line of her cheek; in the light of the fire it was hard to tell if her face was as red as his own would be were their positions reversed. Though he'd been waiting for her to react, it caught him off-guard when she did, turning to face him. With the fire behind her, he couldn't read her expression. She looked from him to the picture and back again. Until she said something, did something, he wouldn't be able to breathe.

Merida took one last look at the picture. Then, carefully, she shut the book, rose and crossed to him, and placed the book in his lap. She knelt in front of him and pressed her fingers to her lips. "_MÃ³r_," she said, laying her hand over his heart, looking up at him shyly. Just as he started to move, to catch her hand and wind his fingers around hers, she stood and went back to the fire. She brought him a spit of meat and settled next to him, leaning against the tree, almost close enough to touch.

It wasn't close enough at all.

10. Chapter 10

It was all a matter of sheer bad luck, really. They had started the day walking, working out the stiffness that came with sleeping on the groundâ€"he could only assume that she was looking forward to

sleeping in a real bed again as much as he was. This morning's Merida was her usual self, but with a shyness sometimes when she looked at him, a flush in her cheeks that he hoped was a good thing.

To distract himself from the thoughts filling his head he watched Toothless walking just ahead of him. He'd have to make some notes about the length of the flight and the time it took Toothless to recover; that was the sort of thing to put in the revised dragon book. The dragon in question seemed back to full strength now. Hiccup was about to suggest they start flying when Toothless raised his head, sniffing the air, and veered away from the path. "Where are you going?" Hiccup asked, following. Soon he smelled what Toothless had: the thick, sweet scent of honey. If there was a comb nearby, Toothless would find it; he might even share with them.

The beehive was at the base of a tree, apparently recently fallen. Toothless ignored the bees still buzzing around it to nose at the hive, trying to get at the honeycomb. Hiccup was content to let him try; if Toothless got stung by the bees it was his own fault, and it wouldn't hurt him much anyway. He turned to ask Merida what she called bees and saw that her eyes were wide, staring over his shoulder. A pair of bear cubs with dark brown fur were peeking from the underbrush near Toothless, making troubled small-bear noises. From a distance they were adorable, but Hiccup backed away toward Merida. The cubs were already frightened enough, and they didn't look very old; he hoped their mother was around somewhere. And then on second thought, he hoped their mother wasn't around after all.

"Toothless," he called quietly, still walking backward, "let's go." The dragon swung his head around, catching sight of the cubs as he did. Hearing their mewls he stepped closer to investigate, looking curious and concerned.

It was at that time that the cubs' mother appeared, rushing forward with a terrible roar, apparently thinking her babies in danger. Merida screamed a warning as the bear swiped at Toothless, ripping his hide, claws catching his wing. The dragon shrieked in pain and whirled around, rearing up with wings spread wide. The bear seemed taken aback for a moment but rose up as well, though she was far shorter than Toothless. Both struck out, clawing at each other, snarling fiercely.

Behind him Hiccup heard the squeak and slide of a bowstring being drawn back. Merida stepped around him, an arrow nocked and ready to loose, her face tense. There wasn't a clear shot, though, and she ran too much danger of hitting Toothless instead of the bear as they struggled. Toothless had the advantage of speed; he feinted suddenly to one side, and as the bear moved that direction he darted the opposite way, ending up behind her. Before she turned he let out a deafening screech that had her stumbling toward her cubs. While she shook her head, disoriented, Toothless rose into the air and swooped over Hiccup and Merida, catching them up and carrying them away.

He didn't make it far, only a few wingbeats through the trees, and only just released them before skidding into the ground, where he lay breathing heavily.

"_Toothless!_" Hiccup rolled to his feet and ran to Toothless, kneeling by his head and laying a hand on his neck. "I'm here, buddy."

It's gonna be okay." Oh, gods, he hoped that was true. Without Toothlessâ€¦ He shook the thought out of his head.

There were bleeding claw marks on his flanks, front legs, and chest, from blows that Hiccup didn't doubt would have easily ripped him apart. Luckily dragon hide was thicker than human skin; the wounds, though welling blood, weren't very deep. A few were wide enough to need stitches, a task that Hiccup didn't look forward to with any relish, but as long as they were cleaned and kept clean, the wounds would heal with time. The other injury might be a different story. He'd seen the bear's paw batting at Toothless' wing, and wing injuries were much more serious. _A downed dragon is a dead dragon_, Gobber's voice echoed in his head.

Toothless hissed a warning, eyes slitted, as Hiccup reached for the wing. "I have to check it, bud," he said, struggling to keep his voice from breaking. "Please." Toothless' eyes stayed on him as he slowly extended the wing, praying under his breath. There were long slashes oozing slightly over both the bone and the membrane, but the membrane hadn't torn. He let his head drop against Toothless' side. "Thank you," he said, head swimming with relief. "Thank you." Then he stood and got to work.

* * *

><p>He wished Fishlegs were there. They all knew basic first aidâ€”you didn't last long as a Viking if you didn't know how to stop a cut from bleeding and set a broken boneâ€”but Legs knew the most about dragon health and husbandry. If he were there he'd both fret with Hiccup and reassure him. Merida said nothing, her face pale. She ran to fetch water and tore a shirt for rags, but she stayed silent, not once touching him. When it became clear that there was nothing more she could do, she moved away and took up her bow, staring into the forest around them, ready to shoot at the first sign of movement.<p>

He'd cleaned out the scratches and packed the deepest ones with moss, then built a fire near where Toothless lay. After that came the fun part. He upended his pack in searching for what he needed, finally pulling out the needle and thread. The needle was wicked, just sharp enough to use on fabric but thick enough for mending the saddle or harness. At least he'd had plenty of practice sewing, he thought humorlessly. Hiccup passed the needle through the fire before he threaded it.

"This is gonna hurt, bud, and I'm sorry for that. But you have to stay still, okay? Just for a little bit." Toothless looked so dejected and hurt that he wanted to cry. Hiccup steeled himself and started the first stitch, trying to ignore the low whine from the dragon.

When he was finished Hiccup stroked Toothless' head and then washed his hands and repacked his things carefully. Once he'd done all that he walked a short distance away and curled up on the forest floor. He didn't even try to keep from crying.

* * *

><p>They stayed the rest of that day and all the next. When he'd returned to the campsite, eyes red, Merida had walked away into the

forest. She came back later with some fish speared on a stick, which she handed to Hiccup wordlessly. Toothless still lay listless, but he ate the fish. By the time Hiccup finished feeding him Merida had returned and was cooking something in a pot over the fire. He watched her, feeling nothing but drained. She brought him the whole pot and set it by his feet where he leaned against Toothless; then she retired, bow again at the ready. The venison stew was no gourmet dish, though she'd added berries and roots for extra flavor. He ate until he was full and turned into Toothless' side, falling into a fitful sleep.<p>

The pot was empty when he woke. Merida lay on the opposite side of the fire, frowning in her sleep, and guilt gripped him. As he checked Toothless' wounds he tried to think of some way to make it up to her, to apologize; they were supposed to be a team, the three of them together, and he'd taken her for granted in his worry over his best friend. He noticed Toothless watching him and gestured for him to remain quiet and watchful. Then Hiccup stole away, thinking that at the very least he could clean the pot and fetch fresh water for them.

He knelt on the bank and scrubbed the pot with a handful of grass. A small bird chirped on a branch above him; sunlight filtered through the canopy and small purple flowers grew near the stream. Now that they'd passed into summer the weather was fairer, slightly warmer and with fewer rain showers. If not for their near-death experience, he would think the place pretty.

Merida didn't even glance up when he returned. The sight of her face, creased with sleep, and the tangle of hair above it gave him an idea. He grabbed a rag and hauled the pot of water to her side, where he wet the cloth and dabbed it on her dirty face. Merida scowled and leaned away, but he persisted until she snapped "Stop" and shoved his shoulder. He had been expecting a reaction like that but let himself sprawl backward anyway as she rose and stalked away, toward the stream.

The neck of her tunic was wet and her face was scrubbed pink when she came back. Hiccup smiled, just a little, and beckoned her toward the log where he sat. She thought about it for a long moment, arms crossed tightly; in the end she joined him, walking with imperious pride—"how had he not known all along that she was royalty?"—and sitting at the far end of the log, glaring sideways at him. This time he didn't even try to hide his grin as he moved to stand behind her, plucking bits of moss from her hair and then combing through it. Her shoulders tensed at his touch but she stayed put, and eventually relaxed.

"This is gonna be my go-to move, isn't it?" he asked rhetorically. "Every time I do something stupid I'll have to find a comb." He kept his tone light even as his heart sank at the realization that he might not have a next time to upset her.

Once he'd finished combing he tried a braid, mimicking what he'd seen her do before. It turned out a little lopsided, but it wasn't bad for a first try. "All done," he said, straddling the log next to her. This time she turned to him, her expression softer than before. "Merida, I'm sorry. I was so worried about Toothless that I ignored you. I didn't mean to; it's just that he's my best friend." She must have understood enough, because she nodded. Then, all at once, she

put her arms around him, her head against his neck. Without hesitation he wrapped his arms around her, feeling a little less lost.

11. Chapter 11

Hiccup would have been content to let Toothless rest another day, but the dragon apparently wasn't. Hiccup woke to the bundle of saddle and harnesses dropping next to his head. Toothless snorted down at him, and Merida laughed nearby. "Okay, I get it. We'll go," he said, stretching.

Though Toothless seemed to be walking fine, there was no question of flying. The longer they walked, the harder it was for Merida to keep pace with them, and no wonder; it might have been months since she'd been home. A day and a half after they'd started again she suddenly stopped, staring hard at some perfectly ordinary trees. The others stared as well, but Hiccup couldn't see anything that set the trees apart from the others around them, and Toothless shook his head. She turned back to them, grinning, and then beckoned for them to hurry before bounding ahead.

Merida grew more and more excited as they moved, dashing ahead of the others in her impatience. When they reached a glade with a circle of great standing stones in its midst she cried out and raced to embrace the nearest one, laying her cheek against the rough surface. Toothless gave a little shrug that echoed Hiccup's sentiments. The stones stretched high and dark into the mist; there were whorls and spirals carved near their tops, and Hiccup stepped forward to get a better look, but Merida grabbed his hand and shook her head solemnly. She whispered a word of warning, and though her tone was reverent her face shone with awe and joy.

"Come," she said after a moment, tugging him away. Their pace was even quicker now, though she didn't drop his hand. He figured he should consider himself lucky: when she'd arrived at his home she had been totally lost, scared, and alone; though he felt lost, he wasn't alone, and it made him admire her strength even more. It would all be fine, he told himself, if he just didn't think of the return journey.

She suddenly sprinted ahead, ripping her hand from his, and he stumbled forward, trying to keep up, Toothless trotting after. She stopped at the edge of the forest and turned quickly as they approached, hands raised.

"Stop!" she hissed. They froze, and then she walked them backward, deeper into the trees. She pointed the way they'd just come. "DunBroch." She'd never looked happier, eyes dancing as she explained that she would go and something about Fergus stabbing Toothless with a spear. He could only assume she was going to try to prevent that from happening.

"Stay," she concluded gleefully, pointing; then, without waiting for a response, she took off, leaving Hiccup to sink onto a log, muttering, "Yeah. Staying."

Toothless heard them first, lifting his head in sudden alertness, earflaps swiveling forward. Then Hiccup heard the thump of hoofbeats,

heavy and rhythmic, and stood, fists clenched at his sides. The hoofbeats stopped beyond the trees, though Hiccup's heart kept pounding. It seemed like hours passed before Merida called their names. He took a ragged breath and looked at Toothless, who nodded and stood; together they walked out to face whatever waited.

Merida sat on a huge black-and-white beast. Next to her, on a smaller mount, was a slim woman with long dark hair. It was Elinor, he realized, Merida's mother, the queen. Her expression was justifiably wary as they emerged, and she gasped quietly at the sight of Toothless. Merida giggled at the reaction, and Hiccup smiled, his mood buoyed by the sound.

He dropped the sacks on the ground and bowed to the queen, hopefully more elegantly than he had all the times he'd done it to tease Merida; out of the corner of his eye he saw Toothless glance at him and then bow too, sliding his chest toward the earth and lowering his head. When he looked up Merida was grinning and Elinor looked quietly impressed.

"Elinor, Hiccup, Toothless," Merida said, gesturing to each in turn. Her mount whickered and shook his head, and she laughed. "Angus," she added indulgently, patting his neck.

Then she held out her hand to Hiccup. "Come." She seemed to want him to climb on Angus' back and ride with her, but he wasn't sure about that, especially as Toothless looked offended at the idea. He lay down and Hiccup slung the sacks over his back before climbing on. This was probably better anyway; a dragon with a rider was less threatening than one without. The three animals walked together, Merida and Angus between her mother and Hiccup. She chattered away, and Elinor reached over and grabbed her hand as they rode.

The towers of DunBroch faded into the mist above it, the stone nearly the color of the sky. Before them was a bridge, and after that a great gate in the wall. The castle was the biggest building Hiccup had ever seen, and he'd be lying if he said it wasn't intimidating. "Oh, boy," he couldn't help muttering. Merida looked down at him, her eyes kind, and put her hand over her heart.

* * *

><p>If he'd thought the castle itself was intimidating, the people that came rushing out of it were even more so. The crowd alternated between cheering for the return of the princess and recoiling in terror at the dragon in the courtyard. Three boys raced through the crowd toward them, all with wild red curls and all identical; one of them climbed onto Angus' back, another started a staring contest with Toothless, and a third ran away, only to reappear within seconds carrying a plate full of cakes and pursued by a large-bosomed woman, who fainted when she caught sight of Toothless. Sure, Merida had drawn three boys, but he hadn't realized they were triplets, or the DunBroch equivalent of the Thorston twins. The triplet with the cakes tossed one each to Merida and his brothers, shoving one in his own mouth as their mother scolded them. Merida laughed, freely, joyfully, and dismounted from Angus to hug the boys and anyone else close by.<p>

From outside the gate came more shouts and the clatter of hooves, and another giant horse ran into the courtyard, ridden by Fergus, the

one-legged king. "Merida!" he bellowed, leaping down and swinging his daughter into the air. The resemblance between their fathers was eerie: same reddish hair, same massive size, same loud voice. Merida peeked over Fergus' shoulder at Hiccup and mouthed "Big," giggling.

Hiccup slid from Toothless' back and stood with one hand on his shoulder. One of the boys looked him up and down with the uncritical candor of childhood and asked him something. Hiccup froze, staring at the boy and unsure what to do, until Merida called down from her father's arms. All he understood was "Toothless."

Fergus set her down and turned, apparently noticing them for the first time. Merida moved to stand between Fergus and Hiccup, cleared her throat and made a short speech, loud enough for the whole crowd to hear. He understood his name, 'Toothless', and his father's, and the name of the village, but not much else. Elinor had dismounted and joined her husband, looking proudly at Merida as she spoke. The crowd cheered when she finished, though the king seemed skeptical.

Merida then turned to Hiccup and Toothless. "Fergus," she said, and then, when one of the boys poked her, added, "Hamish, Hubert, Harris." The boys waved as she said their names, though there was no way he'd ever be able to keep them apart.

Hiccup bowed to the king, and Toothless again imitated him. When he glanced up, he saw the king's eyes on his leg. Toothless noticed too and swung his tail in the air, waving his replacement fin. Fergus looked from the tail to Hiccup's eyes, and nodded slightly.

Then the family started to walk toward the castle, Fergus and Elinor's arms around Merida's shoulders and the boys cavorting around them. Someone led the horses away, and the people started to drift away, returning to their work. Hiccup and Toothless stood together in the emptying courtyard. Halfway to the door Merida paused and twisted in her parents' arms. "Hiccup, Toothless," she called, holding out her hand to them. "Come!"

They followed the family through massive wooden doors into a room like the great hall in Berk. Directly opposite the doors were a set of wooden chairs—"thrones," for the king, the queen, the princess, and the three princes. There were long tables at the sides of the room and, along one wall, a stone staircase leading up to a second storey. As they entered servants were rushing around, carrying one of the tables into the center of the room and arranging chairs around it as Fergus called out orders. More servants bustled in from another room carrying jugs and trays and plates and cups, setting them on the table. Fergus escorted his wife to a chair at one end of the table and Merida to one on a long side before taking his own seat; the triplets scampered to their seats opposite Merida. Again Hiccup stood, assuming that the chair next to Merida was for him, but not wanting to step wrong. And again Merida turned and called his name, this time rolling her eyes.

Toothless left his side and padded to lie down by the hearth. All of the eyes of those seated at the table followed his progress, except for Merida's; she smiled at him all the way to her side.

When they were all seated, the king asked him a question gruffly. Hiccup's eyes slid to Merida, who answered, obviously explaining that

Hiccup couldn't understand and that asking him questions would be a waste of time. His plan to appear competent and responsible was not going to turn out well if he kept responding to questions with slack-jawed silence and Merida excusing him as an idiot.

The queen passed him a basket of bread, still warm from the oven, smelling fresh and yeasty, and it took quite a bit of restraint not to tip the whole basket onto his plate. Fergus started asking questions, scarcely giving Merida time to answer one before the next came. Elinor spread her hands and made a mild suggestion, at which the men settled down and listened as Merida spoke. It was the story of all that had happened to her, and Hiccup paid close attention, telling himself that maybe he could learn more words. When she caught him watching her intently she blushed, and then began to put more gestures into the story to help him follow along. She was a natural storyteller with a rapt audience: the boys hardly fidgeted at all, though they kept a steady stream of food from table to mouths as she talked; her father leaned forward, fists clenched as he heard about her kidnapping, every emotion obvious on his face; and though her mother maintained a neutral countenance, Hiccup saw her knuckles tighten on the edge of the table more than once.

Hiccup wondered all the more what she was saying when she got to the part where she woke up in Berk. She acted out stumbling over Toothless in the dark and meeting Hiccup, and all eyes turned to him. Then she described his father, chuckling, and he felt a pang of sadness. What was Stoick doing right now? Had the raiders come back? He wished he had some way to know. Fergus stroked his beard, seemingly intrigued by the idea of another leader so like himself so far away, and Elinor interrupted with a word he recognized. Before Merida could answer he shook his head. The queen looked at him sadly for a moment before Merida barreled on, talking about finding the raiders and fighting over her staying behind and learning new words on the end of the dock. Then she moved on to the sea voyage, the skipping over the water in the coracle, which her brothers clearly approved of and wanted to try as soon as possible, the mess he'd made of her hair and how he'd fixed it. Elinor gave him an appraising glance at that bit; he wasn't sure if she was impressed, or if she thought he was an idiot.

She asked a question, leaning near Merida's ear, and the girl immediately turned crimson. "_MÃ thair!_" she howled, pointedly not meeting Hiccup's eye. Fergus was scowling at him, though, and Hiccup suddenly hoped Merida's parents hadn't been having the same thought Stoick had before they left. Hiccup looked at the king, wide-eyed, and shook his head emphatically. Fergus didn't look convinced and now Merida, too, was glaring at Hiccup.

"What?" he asked, unable to help himself. His reaction seemed to amuse the king, who started laughing.

Merida did a perfect imitation of how he'd felt slogging cross-country, and then skipped to the fight with the bear. Mother and daughter exchanged looks as Merida described the bear trying to defend her cubs, while Fergus seemed impressed that Toothless had more or less defeated the beast. That brought them to the present day, and the end of Merida's story—or, he thought glumly, the end of their story together. Elinor turned to Hiccup, struggling to find something he would understand. She settled for taking hold of his hand and smiling, tears in her eyes. He gave a half smile and

squeezed her hand in response.

12. Chapter 12

Once they'd finished eating, Elinor waved at the stairs and mimed sleeping. "Hiccup come, Toothless stay?" Merida asked.

He wasn't going to leave Toothless alone in a strange place. "If Toothless stays, I stay," he said, shaking his head. There was a debate then between parents and daughter that he didn't try to follow; it ended with the queen shaking her head in resignation and calling, "Hiccup, Toothless, come." They all gaped at her—he wasn't sure who was the most surprised, but it probably wasn't him. She pushed Fergus and Merida's mouths closed, and beckoned to Hiccup, a bit impatiently.

"We better go, bud," he said quietly, and Toothless stood gracefully.

At the top of the stairs Elinor showed them to a door at the far end of the hall. She pushed it open and ushered him in, indicating the bed, the pitcher and basin, the candles in iron holders; then she left him to rest. It wasn't a large room, but it was big enough for Toothless and the bed, so it was all he could have asked for. He sat on the bed, running his hands through his hair and feeling overwhelmed, while Toothless poked his nose into all the corners and pushed open the shutters. Weak sunlight fell in, and Toothless curled up on the floor in the patch of light.

A knock came at the door; when he answered it a man pushed past him with a load of firewood in his arms, whistling cheerfully as he laid a fire in the hearth and then left. Not long after he'd gone there was another knock. This one was Hubert, Hamish, and Harris, who crowded together in the doorway and made faces at him, trying to push past him into the room, until they were chased away by Merida. She was back in a dress, clearly one of her own in a soft green fabric; she'd washed and looked more regal than ever, and he suddenly realized how dirty and disgusting he must be. And she did tsk at him, but reached up and smoothed his hair down, shaking her head in mock dismay.

When he was more presentable, she pulled him into the hallway and walked him back toward the stairs, pointing at doors as they went. Halfway down the hall she stopped and opened a door, the one to her room. He got a glimpse of a tidy space with a half-finished tapestry on the wall and a pair of bows, one of them hers from Berk, in the corner. She wanted him to know where she was. He nodded his understanding and counted the doors between hers and his as they walked back down the hallway. Five rooms away. After weeks of being within arm's reach of each other, they would be separated by five rooms with thick walls. It made him uneasy, and he hated thinking that she probably didn't mind, since she was back at home.

But Merida was biting her lip as they stopped at the doorway, and before he went in she said his name, softly, like a question. He had his arms around her before she'd finished speaking. He didn't think he imagined her sigh, or the way she relaxed against him, careless of her clean clothes and his dirty ones. Then, at a sound down the corridor, she released him and stepped back, her cheeks pink. Hiccup

backed into the room, bowing to her before; the last thing he saw as he closed the door was her sticking her tongue out at him.

Hiccup flopped backward on the bed, grinning stupidly. "Maybe now we can get some rest," he grumbled, closing his eyes. From the floor Toothless snorted derisively. "Yeah, you're right. How long d'you think it'll be before the triplets come back?"

They managed a solid quarter hour of peace and quiet before there was yet another knock on the door. Hiccup heaved himself up and opened the door to, yep, the triplets, who swarmed around him like a tiny whirlpool of ginger boys. Despite his protests they herded him out of the room and down the stairs, through the great hall and into a small room with a fire roaring in the grate and a large metal tub full of water in the middle. Two of the boys closed the doors with solid clunks; the third, with a commanding glare, pointed from Hiccup to the tub. The others joined him, arms crossed, tapping their toes.

"Really?" Hiccup sighed. Their expressions didn't change, and when he didn't move, they started advancing on him menacingly. "Okay! Okay!" He bent and pulled off his boot, then the shirt from over his head. The boys still stared, and he paused, hands at the waist of his breeches. "Not until you turn around," he said, twirling his finger. They turned their backs to him and he quickly stripped, undid his prosthetic, and hopped into the tub, hissing at the heat. When he was safely in one of the boys ran out with his clothes, another examined his leg, and the third climbed up behind him and pushed his head under the water. Trying to avoid baths had clearly made the triplets experts on the subject, and they wouldn't let him out until they were satisfied he was clean.

Once he'd passed their inspection, and his fingertips had started to wrinkle, one of the boys handed him a towel as another pulled over a stool. When he was dry he reattached his foot, to the triplets' great interest. Then he looked around for something to wear. He wasn't about to walk back to the room wrapped in a towel, even if it was big enough for Fergus.

"Come on, guys, what'd you do with my clothes?" A shirt, neither the one he'd been wearing nor one he'd brought with him, hit him in the face; he put it on, figuring he'd rather be at least partially clothed than not at all. They pulled him to his feet and away from the tub, and one brought out a length of cloth. Its design was similar to the squared pattern they wore, though in different colors. Unfolded, one boy at each end and one in the middle, it was easily three times his height. "Is that for me? 'Cause I may have grown some recently, but that looks big enough for my dad. Or yours. Or both together."

With a quick movement one of the boys whipped the towel away. Almost before Hiccup could react they started wrapping the length of cloth around him, passing it from one set of hands to another, tucking it high around his waist and throwing one end over his shoulder. One boy fetched a heavy belt that he buckled over the cloth, and then they stood back to inspect their handiwork. Feeling a bit dazed, Hiccup hoped the speed they'd worked with didn't mean they'd skipped on security.

This time he didn't try to resist when they led him out of the room.

He had to follow: if he didn't, he'd get hopelessly lost somewhere within the castle. The boys ran through rooms and corridors, causing a general ruckus; in the kitchen they whirled around the cooks, stealing sweets and tossing apples to Hiccup. Even knowing they wouldn't understand, he still called "Sorry!" to the women working there as he followed the boys out.

They emerged in the great hall, where Merida and Elinor sat. The queen looked up and scolded her sons; Hiccup couldn't help feeling included in the scolding and looked down. Merida laughed and called him over, and he joined them, walking self-consciously in his new getup.

Elinor held up one hand before he reached them. He stopped, and she twirled her finger, just as he'd done with the boys; he turned slowly, cheeks burning. When he faced them again he saw her nod, apparently happy with the triplets' work. Merida peered at him and said something to her mother, who shrugged and answered. Merida hugged her mother, briefly but tightly. At Hiccup's obvious confusion she called the boys. When one of them returned and flung himself into her lap, she indicated the fabric he wore. "DunBroch," she said. "Harris, Fergus, Fergus _athair_â€|" She trailed off, spiraling her hand off into the distance to indicate the men of the family who'd come before. Then Merida pushed Harris away and stood to touch the fabric Hiccup now wore. With the other hand she pointed to her mother. "Elinor." So the different patterns were for different families, and Elinor had let him wear hers. He bowed to her, and she smiled.

Merida tucked her hand into the crook of his arm as she led him to a seat, an action that did not escape her mother's notice. When they sat, he handed her one of the apples, and she ate it with relish.

That evening, as they ate dinner, Hiccup was conscious of Elinor watching him closely, especially whenever he interacted with Merida. It unnerved him; her expression was calculating, like he was a sheep at auction and she was trying to decide how much he was worth before bidding. Fergus too seemed wary. At least the boys didn't mind him, though to tell the truth they didn't appear to mind much of anything, including their parents, the laws of physics, and the prospect of death.

When Hiccup returned to the room, his way was blocked by a man at the door, holding a basket of fish and apparently paralyzed with fear. Hiccup peeked around him: a pair of eyes glowed in the darkness on the far side of the bed. He plucked a fish from the basket and tossed it into the air over the bed; it disappeared with a blur of black and a chomping sound. The man dropped the basket and ran. Toothless chuckled around his mouthful, and Hiccup took the basket in to give the dragon his dinner.

13. Chapter 13

There was fishy breath on his face and a dark shadow lay over him. The second he opened his eyes a rough tongue licked the side of his face. Even though he was waking up in an unfamiliar place, waking up to Toothless' face made it feel like home. "Glad to see you're feeling better," he said, scratching Toothless' chin. "Now get off me

so I can get up."

Getting dressed had never posed such a quandary before. On one hand, he didn't want to offend his hosts by not wearing what they'd provided for him; on the other, he didn't want to offend them by having the garment slip off and expose him, with his luck in front of the whole castle. He figured they'd prefer his clothes to remain on his body in public, so he dug out his cleanest things and splashed water on his face. Toothless followed at his heels as he headed down the stairs.

The king and one of his sons sat at the table—rather, the king sat, and his son stood on a chair, stabbing for a piece of meat with a small knife. Hiccup stood at the foot of the stairs until Fergus caught sight of him and waved a huge hand toward the table. He took the chair at Fergus' right hand, opposite the triplet. At his side, Toothless rose on his haunches to see what food was on the table. Hiccup chuckled awkwardly and leaned on his head to push him down, but Fergus was looking at the wounds on the dragon's back. He asked a word, then remembered himself and snarled, one hand forming a claw.

"Yeah, the bear," Hiccup said, nodding. Fergus nodded too, swinging his wooden leg onto the tabletop and swiping at it with his clawed hand. He pointed to Hiccup's leg under the table, eager curiosity on his face. Fergus wanted the story—Hiccup was growing to realize the king loved stories. There was no way he'd be able to tell the tale of the fight against the Red Death with just gestures, though. After a moment of thought he held up a finger. "One minute," he said, and raced up the stairs.

He came back down with his sketchbook and dragged his chair closer to Fergus', nudging Toothless out of the way. He flipped to a blank page and tried his best to illustrate the fight, the chase and the fiery fall to earth; it was a long process, during which the other boys appeared, one of them draping himself over Toothless' head for a better view. At the end of the story Fergus looked to be all but overflowing with questions. He also looked at Hiccup with a bit more respect.

After he'd had a chance to eat something, Fergus led them out into the courtyard. Hiccup spent the rest of the day with the men of the family, not once seeing Merida or Elinor; he took a tour of the buildings, saw the view of the lake and the forests from the highest tower, went down to the lake's edge to let Toothless fish, even reluctantly joined the boys' sword practice. After that particular exercise, he'd be covered with bruises in the next few days. To give him a respite Toothless allowed the boys to climb on him and even rose into the air briefly before a spasm of pain in his wing forced him to land. The triplets tumbled off, grinning and cheering wildly. By the time they all sat to dinner, Merida smiling next to him, Hiccup felt he'd bonded with Fergus.

* * *

><p>The next morning they walked down the stairs to an uproar in the great hall. Servants were sweeping and scrubbing the floor; others carried in benches or put new candles in the holders or rushed into the kitchen with water and bushels of food.<p>

"What's going on?" Hiccup asked Merida, where she sat out of the way of the bustle with Elinor and the boys. Merida handed him a plate of breakfast and he sat to eat.

Before she could answer, Elinor turned to her and asked something. They conferred for a second, after which Elinor looked at Hiccup. "Big eat," she said, spreading her arms wide, then set one hand on Merida's shoulder. A feast to celebrate the princess' return, then. When they were done eating Elinor shooed them all out of the hall so the preparations could carry on unimpeded.

Merida grabbed Hiccup's hand and dragged him from the hall, Toothless following them to a lean-to where Angus stood munching. She saddled him and then swung onto his back, holding a hand down to him. "I don't know if this is a good ideaâ€¦" Merida rolled her eyes and shook her hand at him until he sighed and took it, hauling himself up with much less ease. He didn't know what to do with his hands, putting them on his knees; then Angus wheeled and galloped for the gate, and he threw his arms around her waist rather than fall off. When he dared to glance over his shoulder, Toothless was flapping from the ramparts to the top of the highest tower.

Riding Angus was nothing like riding Toothless. On Toothless' back they were far above the ground; on Angus', the ground was very much a part of the process, and occasionally a painful one at that. They raced back into the forest that they'd so recently come out of, dodging trees and jumping over fallen logs. Hiccup was glad she was in front and knew when to duck; otherwise he'd certainly have been knocked off by a branch to the face. Only when Angus' pace slowed to a trot did Hiccup loosen his grip on Merida.

It was nice, being in the woods with her again. Especially now that they didn't have to worry about making it to DunBroch alive. The forest around them seemed friendlier, green light shining on them and the blue sky above. He tipped his head up to enjoy the warmth on his face, and then leaned too far backward and had to wheel his arms to keep from falling off Angus' back. He looped them loosely around her again, feeling a laugh ripple through her. "Maybe I'll keep holding on. Just to be on the safe side," he said. She looked back at him with a smirk, the sunlight golden on her profile; then she turned back, but for the briefest second he felt her hand rest on his.

* * *

><p>The moment she dismounted from Angus back at the castle, Merida was caught by one of the women, who shook her finger sternly at Hiccup. Merida's laugh rang through the courtyard as she was dragged off. Hiccup wandered into the great hall, hoping to find his way back up to the tower where Toothless had been. As he passed through the hall, a group of men were hanging a tapestry of the royal family over their thrones; it had obviously been torn at some point and clumsily repaired. Already he knew that Queen Elinor wouldn't allow something to be displayed in that state unless it had some meaning. Maybe he'd be able to hear the story somehow.<p>

Eventually he pushed open the doors and looked out into the open air. Toothless raised his head as Hiccup stepped out onto the walkway that ringed the tower. "Hey, bud. How are you feeling?" Toothless flicked his tongue out. The scratches on his wing were starting to scab; the other cuts were clean and dry and beginning to heal. "It all looks

good. It's still hurting to fly, though, huh?" Toothless nodded, eyes closed. Hiccup stretched out his legs and Toothless rested his head on Hiccup's lap. He hoped their welcome wouldn't run out before Toothless healed.

He didn't want to think about having to go home. DunBroch was, so far, a fine adventure: not too easy, not too dangerous, with a noble purpose and worthy companions. It was understandable that he didn't want to give one of those companions up. She was strong, courageous, quick, stubborn, and proud, as good a hero as any in the old tales. That must have been why he didn't want to make the journey back without her: they complemented each other. When he thought (or overthought), she acted. While he looked for a safe escape route, she armed herself to defend them. They worked well together—they'd been able to communicate pretty well without knowing each others' language. She understood him, somehow; not just what he meant when he tried to say something, but what he was. She was a friend. That was why he didn't want to go away from her. Right? Friends didn't like to be so far away from each other for the rest of their lives. That was why his stomach felt hollow when he imagined not just the journey home, but all the days that would come after it, bleak without the blaze of her to light up the days. As he thought it, he knew that he hadn't felt this way about any of his friends, not Astrid, not even Fishlegs, when he left Berk. Even if he had been about to leave them forever, he wouldn't feel this—empty.

He shifted uncomfortably against the stone of the tower at his back. She was just different, he told himself. He'd grown up in Berk and had known everyone there since either he'd been born or they had, and she'd been something new and different, a person he didn't know. She was a novelty, like the dragons had been: exciting because he'd never seen them before, because they were a puzzle and a challenge to liven things up. Eventually, when he got used to her, she'd fade into the background. He might even get tired of her. Toothless snapped at a fly buzzing around his head, and a voice in Hiccup's said, _You haven't gotten tired of the dragons yet. You love Toothless even more now than you did when you first found him. She's no different from the dragons. Who's to say you won't like her even more in the future than you do now? Do you want to spend the rest of your life wishing for something you can't have? _

14. Chapter 14

A woman's voice calling his name interrupted his thoughts. Hiccup peered over the parapet; below him Elinor was standing in the courtyard, looking for him. "Hi, um, Queen Elinor," he yelled back, waving. She squinted up at him and beckoned him down.

They met in the great hall, where she looked him over thoroughly. Then she personally escorted him to the bath. Toothless snickered, until Elinor looked back with a raised eyebrow and said something that he seemed to understand, because he backed away like she'd dangled an eel in front of him.

Fergus walked in, a pile of clothes in his hands, as Hiccup was adjusting his leg. Hiccup pulled the shirt over his head, and then Fergus taught him to dress himself, or tried to; Hiccup wasn't sure how it was possible to do with only two hands.

The king led him to a place at a table in the front of the hall and motioned for him to wait there. Servants were laying places with plates and cups, and musicians were gathering in one corner. People began to fill the hall; the men wore their patterned clothing and the women bright dresses. Some of the girls were very pretty, he noticed, as two of them walked by, staring at him and giggling. The giggling itself was kind of strange—it wasn't the usual mocking laughter that he heard, but a light, inviting sound, a laughter that might have been about him but wasn't at him. It made no sense. He understood the staring, though, and now that he looked around a lot of people were staring at him, actually. It was starting to make him nervous when the doors creaked open and everyone stood.

The king and queen entered, processing in a stately manner that he was sure came more naturally to Elinor than Fergus. Fergus beamed, and his wife's expression, though restrained, was just as happy. They were followed by the triplets, one after the other, swinging their arms and swaggering like the feast was all for them. When the rest of the family stood together at the head table, Merida appeared in the doorway, and shouts and cheers filled the hall.

Even from a distance Hiccup could tell that she was fighting to keep a grin from breaking through her demure smile. If it weren't for that, he didn't know if he'd be able to recognize Merida of the wild hair, who spat at the feet of her captors, in the princess before him. She wore a dark blue dress with gold embroidery; her hair was pulled back and a golden circlet glinted among the curls. She stood to her father's left, and he began a speech that was heartfelt, if not eloquent. Hiccup heard his own name a few times, and Toothless', and the eyes of the crowd went to him and then cast about for his dragon. Finally Fergus raised his cup and they all toasted to Merida's safe return.

While clearly benefitting from the queen's civilizing influence, the feast wasn't that much different from any back in Berk. There were roast meats and odd vegetables and something called haggis that looked like it'd come out of the wrong end of a goat but tasted rather nice. There was also no shortage of drink; he had a good idea of who'd be starting fights after the feast was done. Dessert was warm apple cake topped with thick cream. From Merida's sighs of pleasure he figured it was a favorite treat.

Once the dishes had been cleared away, the revelers moved the tables aside. Fergus and Elinor took to the middle of the floor to perform a stately dance. After he escorted his wife back to her seat the king pulled Merida out of hers, roaring; the musicians struck up a livelier tune, and father and daughter stomped and whirled together, laughing the whole time. Over the cheers that met the end of the song Merida called something and the floor flooded with people eager to dance. Merida didn't deny anyone who asked her to dance, her skirt blurring as she spun and her hair burnished in the candlelight. The dances were complicated, with patterns of four and eight, and much weaving in and out. Hiccup couldn't tell how they managed it, but the dancers all seemed to know who their partners were, and almost everyone managed to be in the right place at the right time.

One of the pretty girls approached and spoke to Hiccup, smiling coyly. Surely she wasn't asking him to dance. Elinor leaned over and answered the girl, who curtsied to the queen and shot Hiccup an unfamiliar, smoldering look as she left. He looked at Elinor, who

twirled her finger and pointed at him. "Really? Why would she want to dance with me?" he couldn't help asking aloud. As expected, she didn't respond, but studied his face until he was forced to lower his eyes.

Merida dropped into the seat next to him, fanning herself with one hand. Her cheeks were glowing, and curls had flown out of their bands to fall against her face. She stole a sip from Hiccup's drink and chattered to her mother. After a moment's rest she looked at him and jerked her head toward the dancers. "Merida," her mother admonished, but she ignored Elinor in favor of taking his hand and pointing to the dance floor. In return he pointed to his leg, at which she rolled her eyes and jabbed a finger at Fergus, dancing with gusto in the midst of the crowd. He tried again, twirling his finger and shrugging exaggeratedly, then indicating that he would fall down if he tried. She looked unimpressed with his argument and tugged on his hand again; Hiccup felt he wasn't going to get out of it no matter what, so he sighed and shrugged. That seemed to be agreement enough to her, as she stood and pulled him from his chair.

She called something and the dancers backed away, except for another couple who Merida spoke to. Then she turned to Hiccup and directed him to watch her, as if he would do anything else. The music began, slower than before, and they started to dance.

Luckily the other couple was tolerant of getting bumped into and occasional kicks to the shin. If nothing else, his performance would keep anyone else from wanting to dance with him. Whenever they came together, hands clasped between them, he let Merida lead, trusting her to know where they ought to go. She smiled quietly at him, her hands warm in his, until he nearly tripped over his own feet; then she whirled away, laughing kindly, and he had to remind himself not to stare after her.

At the end of the song the watching crowd clapped politely as the couples bowed and curtsied to each other. He escorted Merida back to their seats, holding her hand high between them as Fergus had done with Elinor, and sat by her side as people came to wish her well. Fewer were paying him any mind now, but enough scrutinized him that he tried to fidget away, put more space between her and him, thinking that they considered him presumptuous for being so close to her. Her touch on his arm kept him where he was, though. If anyone noticed their hands entwined under the table, they didn't mention it.

15. Chapter 15

He was having a nightmare. In it, his hostess, the queen, was striding through the room where he slept, throwing open the shutters to the brilliant light outside, and standing at the foot of the bed, hands on her hips as she spoke at him. If the nightmare got any worse, in a minute she'd pull the blanket off of him. That couldn't happen, even in a dream, so he took the pillow off of his head and sat up, unsurprised to find that he wasn't having a nightmare after all. Unless his whole life counted as a nightmare.

Though recently, it wasn't seeming so bad as that. The feast last night had been fun. Merida had danced more, including a memorable set with her mother, all three of her brothers, and an especially stalwart serving girl. When they'd tired of dancing, a man stood and

sang a song, the audience joining him on every chorus; then someone had called out and soon the whole hall was clamoring, a noise that only stopped when the princess stood. She gestured to the mended tapestry above the thrones and then told a long tale. He'd tried his best to understand, but even though he recognized a few words, and she told it in her usual animated style, he just couldn't follow it. There was something about a bear, and her whole family was involved somehow. The audience all knew the story and hung on her every word, and Hiccup had contented himself with watching Merida throw herself into the telling, her face registering despair, determination, repentance, and finally joy as the story ended.

When it was finished, Elinor had excused herself and Fergus for the night and carried the boys away, floppy in exhaustion. Merida had said good night to people as they left; when the guests had all gone she'd excused the servants halfheartedly clearing away empty cups and then stood alone in the center of the hall, hugging herself, looking radiant. He'd had to join her then, couldn't stand to stay sitting while she was there, and she'd smiled around his name and jumped on his back, catching him off-guard again. So he'd carried her up the stairs and dropped her unceremoniously at her door, where she wrinkled her nose at him. Merida had yawned as she wished him good night, pushing open the door, and he'd caught her hand and kissed it, bowing low. "Oh, Hiccup," she'd murmured quietly, eyes wide and glinting. He'd fallen backward onto his bed certain he wouldn't be able to sleep, what with the somersaults his stomach was doing and the racing of the blood through his veins.

And then her mother had woken him up. Elinor laid a set of clothes on the end of the bed and gave him a significant look before sweeping out of the room. When the door clicked closed Toothless peeked over the top of the bed. "I don't know either," he said, throwing off the blanket and getting dressed.

She was waiting outside the door and led him down the stairs, across the great hall, and through the kitchen, where he managed to snag a few rolls as they passed. Yelps of surprise greeted Toothless' progress as he padded after Hiccup.

Elinor walked briskly down corridors he didn't remember from the tour with Fergus, up and down stairs, passing through rooms used for storage or nothing at all. By the time they finally reached their destination, Hiccup had no idea where in the castle they were; for all he knew, they might have somehow passed outside of the main building and into a different part of the grounds altogether. The room was shadowed, with only faint grey light coming in through the spaces in a shuttered window, and not much brighter when she heaved up the bar and opened the shutter. With the light that came in he saw that the walls were lined with bookshelves.

Elinor smiled at the breath he sucked in as she produced a tinderbox to light the candles in a pair of branched stands on the table. She ran her fingers over dusty spines, selecting certain books and handing them back to him. When his arms were full he dumped the stack on the table. Elinor sat and opened the topmost volume, clouds of dust rising as she flipped the pages. Toothless sneezed.

Neither of the first two books had what she was looking for, whatever that was; the third was set aside open, obviously containing something of interest. When she'd finished with the first group of

books they returned them to the shelves and Elinor took more down. Some were atlases, some charts that he believed were family trees, though, not being able to read the characters, he couldn't say for sure; at least one was illustrated with fantastic beasts, dragons and seal-people and something like Angus with a horn sprouting from its forehead. The dragon looked like a young Monstrous Nightmare, less spiky than an adult, though the jet of flame it shot was all wrong. If he'd known that they were coming here he would have brought his sketchbook; but surely in a room full of books there would be something to write on. "Elinor," he said, and mimed writing when she looked up, an eyebrow quirked. She rummaged through a large chest and found a sheaf of thick paper and a stick of charcoal. He quickly jotted Dragon in runes, then more carefully copied the other word.

A few moments passed as they each worked; then the silence was broken by a victorious "Aha!" He glanced up at Elinor: a streak of dust crossed one cheek, and her hands rested on the pages of a large book. She held up one finger as she flipped a few more pages, then paused, mouth working silently for a moment. Finally, hesitantly, she said, "Welcome," then raised her eyes to see his reaction.

At first he thought he was hearing things. "What?"

She repeated it, more confidently. "Welcome." His jaw dropped and she laughed, loud and triumphant. Hiccup's chair overturned as he raced around the table to stare at the book.

One column was filled with runes, familiar phrases like "Good day" and "sheep," with rounded characters in the next column. Elinor pointed at her writing and said "Welcome" again; then she pointed to the words on the facing page. The runes made no sense as he spoke them aloud, but she nodded, and he realized that it was the sounds of her word in his writing. They shared a grin before Elinor flipped back a page. "Thank you," she said fervently, grasping his hand, "thank you."

* * *

><p>They spent another hour with the book, flipping pages and trying to put together sentences, laughing and helping each other pronounce things. Elinor told him that he could stay as long as they needed to, and thanked him again and again for bringing Merida back; Hiccup apologized for taking so long in returning, and thanked her and Fergus for letting him stay. She learned to say "It's time for dinner"; he learned to say "Where is Toothless?" Now that he was paying attention he realized just how intelligent the queen was. It had been obvious before that she was smarter than her husbandâ€"not that Fergus was anything like Snotlout or Tuffnutâ€"but she remembered the words easily, and was forming complete sentences before he was.<p>

"Where did this book come from?" he wondered. There was nothing on the cover to show that this book was the goldmine it was.

She explained slowly with the aid of the dictionary. "Long ago, people came from the North to trade. But they spoke a different language and we could not understand each other. One of the traders and one of our people worked together to find a way for us to speak." She tapped the book. "When the traders stopped coming, the dictionary

was put away, and everyone forgot the things they'd learned of their language." She smiled at him archly. "Even the traders who stayed."

"Wait. So some of the traders stayed in DunBroch? Did theyâ€"

His questions were interrupted by Toothless' stomach grumbling loudly. Hiccup frowned while Elinor laughed. Seeing her like this was niceâ€"he'd thought that Merida was much more like Fergus than her mother, but since he'd gotten to spend time with the queen, he saw a lot more similarities between the two women. Before they left the room she found an empty book and gave it to him to take, along with the atlases and the book of beasts; she carried the big dictionary herself.

Merida scowled when they emerged, shaking with excitement and laden with books, in the great hall, where the rest of the family was eating lunch. Hiccup only understood that the question she asked started with "Where" and that there was a "you" in it, but it was more than he would have gotten before. Smirking, Elinor nudged him with her elbow and then set down the books she carried. He cleared his throat, turned to Merida, and said, "Hello, Merida. How are you?"

Her mouth dropped open, displaying its half-chewed contents. "What?" He understood that one.

"Merida!"

She wiped her mouth and swallowed hastily. "What?" she demanded again, rising.

Her intense stare was definitely eating at his confidence. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said, slowly and politely, glancing from the books still in his hands to the ones her mother had put down. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

She looked at her mother and let loose a torrent of words that he had no chance of following; Elinor answered calmly, but the satisfied smile was firmly on her lips. Merida looked back at him, head cocked to one side, and asked, "Are you hungry?"

That was harder. He repeated the words in his head until he thought he understood. "Yes?"

Merida took the books from him and put them on the table, then led him to the seat next to hers. Without speaking more she prepared him a plate; she set it before him, then planted a kiss firmly on his cheek. He turned red and snuck a glance at Fergus, who just shook his head, not even pausing in chewing. The triplets started making exaggerated, obnoxious kissy noises, though, and Hiccup sighed.

At the end of lunch, when the food had been taken away and the boys run off to their afternoon lessons, Hiccup opened the book on the table and repeated to Fergus what he'd already said to Elinor. Fergus waved away the apology and thanked him. As he walked away, he dropped

a hand on Hiccup's shoulder and smiled.

Next to him, Merida was flipping through the book. His mouth went dry as he wondered what she might say to him. They'd had so long without saying anything of substance, relying on single syllables and pointing fingers; he suddenly had no idea what he wanted to say, because there were just too many possibilities. After a moment of paging back and forth she said, beaming, "I am happy with you."

Part of him wanted to believe what she said, but part of him worried that he was hearing something different from what she meant. He hunched over the book and searched for the words, eventually asking doubtfully, "With me?"

With one hand she lifted his face. "With you," she repeated, low and clear, stroking her thumb across his cheek. She licked her lips, and if he couldn't think of what he wanted to say before, he certainly couldn't now. Words were overrated, anyway. He leaned forward, drawn by something that he didn't dare question, until he felt her breath stutter against his lips. In the beat before he closed the gap, there were footsteps on the stairs, and he looked up to see the queen, her eyes on them. Hiccup went ahead and dropped his head against the tabletop as Merida muttered above him.

16. Chapter 16

It became obvious that they were never alone together after that. If one of the other royals wasn't there, it was Maudie, or some other sharp-eyed woman of the castle. If they sat talking with the help of the big dictionary, if they walked around the courtyard, if they practiced archery, someone was always there, not necessarily within eavesdropping distance, but close by enough that they couldn't escape easily. Hiccup had never felt so frustrated; taking it out with a sword on a practice post seemed like the best course of action. Because they weren't going to do anything wrongâ€”they hadn't done anything wrong.

As he thwacked away he considered that maybe her parents were right. She was the princess; he was just a skinny Viking. Even if he was the chieftain's son, there was no guarantee that he'd succeed Stoick. And he'd have to go home sooner or later, back to Berk. So maybe he shouldn't get too close to Merida.

He almost laughed aloud at the thought. It was way too late for that. They'dâ€”well, he hadâ€”crossed that line back on the ship, a comb in his hand. He wouldn't try to pretend that they were merely friends now; no one would believe that, and with good reason. Maybe because whenever he looked at her he was struck dumb, and all he wanted to do was kiss her. He stabbed viciously at the pole, hoping no one was around to notice him turn red even at the thought of kissing her.

At least now he had an idea that she felt the same way, more or less. He'd been hesitant to believe anyone would feel that way about him, especially not someone like Merida, who was so strong and vibrant. But it was hard to deny the evidence of her hand on his, or her arms around him, or her lips on his cheek, or her voice saying she was happy with him. He took a deep breath and paused to wipe sweat from his forehead. If Toothless were feeling up to it they'd go for a long flight, letting the wind push away all his worries. Anyway, Toothless

had wandered down to the lake where the boys were fishing with one of the guards. Hiccup took a few more halfhearted swings before sagging against the post. "This is hopeless," he said, forehead against the wood.

As he wandered through the kitchen, he heard voices in the great hall. It may not have been a full-blown argument, but it seemed to be working that way. Elinor sat with her proper posture, but Fergus was leaning his forehead in one hand, and Merida paced in front of them. When he walked in they all looked at him, falling silent; Merida blushed fiercely. "Hello," he said, waving wanly, intending to carry on up the stairs and to his room, but Fergus hauled himself from his seat. He grabbed the book from the table as he passed, and Hiccup trailed after him as he clomped up the stairs.

What followed was without a doubt the most awkward conversation he'd ever had the misfortune to suffer through, prolonged by the fact that Fergus had to continually flip through the dictionary to find the words he wanted. It made Hiccup miss Stoick; their conversation had been embarrassing, but at least he understood it all the first time. Now he sat in silence as Fergus talked.

"Merida is the princess, and the oldest child. One day she will be the queen. She has known this all her life. Some years ago we invited our clan allies to present suitors for her hand." Hiccup had never really thought about that, because he hadn't thought about her and marriage together—"until recently, if he was going to be honest. He wasn't fond of the thought of her having suitors, but he tried not to let it show as the king continued, shaking his head. "She didn't like the idea. Almost caused our alliance to break. But in the end, we all agreed that forcing our children to marry wasn't fair. We promised Merida that she could marry for love."

Hiccup seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. He sat very still as Fergus searched his face.

"Then she was kidnapped. The other clans helped us search, but they also saw weakness. Some of them started to demand the marriage again. They won't like that she's come home in love." Fergus' look made it obvious who he thought she was in love with.

It felt like a shock had coursed through him, head to toe. And that was just from her _dad_ saying it. Hiccup still shook his head. "She's not— She's not. Not with me." If he started to believe it and they turned out to be wrong, he would burst into flames from the strength of his shame and disappointment.

"You kept her safe. You cared for her and brought her home. If she let me pick for her, I would pick you over the other suitors." He shrugged, since he'd already made it clear that he wouldn't force his own wishes on her. "But the problem is not how you feel or she feels or I feel. It's how the clan chiefs feel about it. If they object to your union, they could cause problems."

Hiccup couldn't sit there quietly anymore. "What union? We haven't talked about any of this! I haven't even told her how I feel." How could he have, when he'd basically just figured it out himself?

After the outburst had been repeated and translated, Fergus winked at

Hiccup and shoved the book into his arms. "Then go tell her."

* * *

><p>The great hall was empty when he peered in, except for Merida, sitting at the table. It was considerate of them to give them some privacy now; he didn't know what he was going to say, so he really wasn't prepared to say it with an audience. "Um. Hi."<p>

She gave him a faint half-smile as he sat down with the book on the table in front of them. For a moment they sat quietly, Merida with her hands tucked under her and Hiccup drumming his heels against the legs of the chair, neither of them looking at the other. Hiccup was still trying to process what Fergus had said. He was supposed to tell her how he felt, but then what? Why had Fergus had to mention marriage? Hiccup was just trying to get his head around wanting to kiss her all the time; he wasn't thinking about marrying her.

Yeah, you are, said that dumb voice in his head_. You'd do it, for her. You'd swim all the way from Berk to be with her. You'd leave your home and fight off bears and dance like an idiot to make her happy. If she wants you to stay, you'll stay. If she doesn't, you'll go back to Berk without your heart. If she thinks that marrying some other chieftain's son is what's best for DunBroch, if that's what she truly believes, then you'll have to let her do it, because her duty is to her people. But don't forget, you're a chieftain's son, too._

It occurred to him that all of those were the kind of things he should have been telling her, so he did. Merida rested her head on his shoulder as he looked for words, gently correcting his pronunciation when he spoke. He wasn't sure how well she was listening; her voice sounded far off. When he got to the part about possibly marrying one of the sons out of a sense of duty, he realized that his shirt was wet beneath her cheek.

"Don't cry," he soothed, turning in his seat to face her. "It's okay." He wiped the tears away, managing a small smile. "Please don't cry."

She looked at him, her face damp and pleading, and he pulled her to him. Her wet nose pushed into his neck and he buried his face in her hair, feeling instantly warmer. He tried to remember when putting his arms around her became normal. "All I want is for you to be safe and happy. I'd prefer it to be with me, but whatever it takes."

Merida sat back and regarded him from arms length. "I am happy with you," she said, just as she had earlier. This time he didn't doubt it for a second. "Iâ€" She cursed and paged through the book impatiently. "I would sooner have you than any other." _Gods_, that sounded good. "But I'm not ready, and the clansâ€|"

Damn her reasonable and legitimate concerns. She was right. He couldn't even be angry about any of it because of how right she was. They had only known each otherâ€_known_ each other, to say nothing of having actual feelings for each otherâ€for a short time. And even then, she had the kingdom to think of; its needs had to come before her own desires. Hiccup slumped, suddenly dejected. He'd done all he could, and now he had to wait for others to decide his fate.

But then her hand was in the hair at the nape of his neck and she was saying his name sweetly. And this time there was no one to interrupt when he brushed his lips against hers, tasting of apples. She grinned against his lips and dragged him closer, tilting her head and laying a hand over his heart. When she snuggled against him, her head tucked under his chin, the things she murmured didn't need any translation.

17. Chapter 17

The next morning the castle was bustling again. Elinor was directing the servants; Hiccup saw a line of men rolling casks across the great hall, and the place was full of the smell of baking bread. "Not another feast?" he asked.

She shook her head, pulling a scrap of paper from her sleeve and referring to it. "The clan chiefs are coming," she read.

His heart sank. "Already?" Since his talk with Fergus he'd known it would be a possibility, but he hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

Elinor looked at him sympathetically. "We sent word as soon as Merida returned." As that seemed to exhaust what she'd written, she patted him on the shoulder and then went back to her duties.

He went looking for Toothless. Maybe they could do something to distract him from the impending sense of doom he had. A fleeting thought told him that he should find Merida, since this might be it for them, but a quick peek at the stable showed him that Angus was absent. He hoped she wasn't out by herself, not after having been kidnapped; then he considered who he was talking about and knew that she probably was. He couldn't begrudge her wanting to have some time alone with her best friend.

His was on the wall that surrounded the castle, with three red-haired terrors climbing over him. Toothless gave Hiccup a longsuffering look as one boy stuck his head in the dragon's mouth and another tried to pull out his wing. "Let's go for a walk, guys," Hiccup said. They'd be doing everyone a favor if they all got out of the way, and it wouldn't hurt his chances if he kept the princes safe and reasonably clean. Toothless stood, tumbling the boys, and glided down from the wall to the open space outside. They _ooh_ed in awe and raced down after him.

For the rest of the morning they walked around the grounds, Toothless allowing the boys to ride on his back and even rising into the air just over Hiccup's head, to their endless delight. Hiccup tried to practice some phrases on them, but they either didn't understand or didn't care what he was saying. On one occasion when Toothless was aloft, the boy aboard gave a sudden shout, pointing into the distance. Another triplet scampered up to stand on Hiccup's shoulders. He swayed forward but kept his balance, shielding his eyes against the glare off the lake. A boat was moving steadily over the water, and as he watched two more came into view behind it. The third boy ran back toward the castle, shouting, while Toothless dropped to the ground. "Guess we ought to get back."

The triplet who'd run ahead was still shouting when they reached the

great hall, where Fergus was watching him in bemusement. As the other boys climbed down from their mounts he asked a word and mimed rowing a boat. Hiccup nodded and Fergus caught the boys, one under each arm and another dangling by his belt, and carried them off, doubtless to have a dreaded bath. Their protests echoed loudly down the hall.

Hiccup washed with cold water in his room, nervous excitement pooling in his stomach. Even if some kind of judgment was coming, he'd feel better seeing the men bringing it. They couldn't be worse than any of the enemies he'd faced before, not if they were allied with the king.

If he was going to stand up for himself and for Merida, he was going to do it as himself. After getting dressed, he put on his harness and saddled Toothless, who looked askance at the preparations. "It's just for show," Hiccup assured him. "I hope." Toothless nudged him in the stomach and then licked his face, carefully not slobbering in his hair. "Thanks, bud."

* * *

><p>After a few hours of tense waiting in the great hall, during which he flipped idly through the dictionary without really remembering anything, Toothless sat up, earflaps swiveling. The royal family came in through one of the side passages, filing to their thrones. Merida's hands were clenched in front of her; he smiled, trying to reassure her, but her look of grim determination in return couldn't really be termed a smile. Then the doors opened and bagpipes screeched and the hall filled with men.<p>

There were three groups of them, each led by a man and his son. He looked at his apparent rivals, the other suitors. One of the boys reminded him of Fishlegs, large in stature but fundamentally gentle; one had hair like a fluffy chick and a permanently unfocused air; and one was haughty, for all that he was splashed with blue paint. None of them seemed to notice him and Toothless where they sat off to one side of the thrones.

Fergus greeted them all, and the newcomers cheered Merida's safe return. The king then gestured to him and Hiccup stepped forward, Toothless stalking behind him, doing his best impression of a terrible beast tamed by a bold warrior. A collective gasp filled the room, and every hand flew to a weapon—there was quite a variety of those, from swords to bows to heavy spiked maces. When Toothless tried to push around him, Hiccup hissed, "Don't overdo it, you ham. I'm pretty sure these guys will kill you without thinking twice." They stood as Fergus talked about them; Hiccup stared back defiantly at all the faces regarding them with suspicion and fear and grudging respect and a bit of curiosity. When Fergus was finished he dismissed them, saying, "Thank you, Hiccup," and they turned to the thrones to bow. Elinor's nod at their show buoyed his confidence. He caught Merida's eye and winked, and she gave the first real smile he'd seen from her all day, hand over her heart.

The largest chieftain asked a question, and the princess stepped forward and told an abbreviated version of her story. Several times during the story the audience's eyes swung to where he sat by the wall, Toothless at his feet like a guard dog. The crowd all looked especially interested when she got to the fight with the mother bear,

and he noticed more than one set of eyes looking up at the tapestry on the wall. Merida finished the story and sat; there was no clamor, so Hiccup figured she hadn't ended with "I still don't plan to marry any of your sons, though, sorry."

Then the short one with the mustache spoke up; before he'd completely finished the blue-painted one jumped in, adding something. Fergus' answer started an uproar, and despite Elinor's best attempts to keep the peace, the negotiations that followed were raucous and lively. Though Hiccup had no idea what was being said, it was amusing to watch the chieftains strut and shout and overreact to each other. He was sure it was less fun if you could understand them, though, and one look at Merida's face confirmed it. He tapped his metal foot on the floor a few times to get her attention. When she looked over he gave her a half smile, and she wrinkled her nose, probably because she couldn't stick out her tongue.

The discussion, if you could call it that, continued until dinner, and resumed the next morning. Hiccup had had enough of that yesterday, so he and Toothless skirted the great hall and entered the courtyard. The heirs were there, each of them sitting with other members of their clans. The smallest one—"Wee Dingwall, Hiccup thought he was called, and he'd be right at home in Berk with a name like that"—caught sight of Toothless and walked toward them; Toothless bristled, but Hiccup put a hand on his head. Dingwall offered his hand for Toothless to sniff, like a dog. Toothless sneered until Hiccup prodded him surreptitiously; then he gave the boy's fist a brief lick. Dingwall beamed.

The others joined them. The large one, probably MacGuffin, reached out slowly, barely touching Toothless' skin before withdrawing his hand. Then Macintosh demanded something that wasn't "What's your name?" or "Is he dangerous?", the questions Hiccup had most prepared to understand and answer. He didn't have time to get out the other phrase he'd practiced, "I don't understand," before Dingwall explained for him, shaking his fuzzy head. Macintosh didn't like that, looming over Dingwall in an attempt to intimidate him, but all the other boy had to do was snap his teeth and Macintosh backed off.

"I think now would be a good time for a display of aerial acrobatics," Hiccup said, swinging into the saddle. The second he'd snapped into the harness Toothless leapt, scattering the heirs. Hiccup heard him snicker as they climbed.

It felt like years since they'd last flown like this. "Don't hurt yourself," Hiccup warned, but he wasn't really worried, and Toothless shook his head in agreement. The dragon followed the wall around the castle, circling it in seconds, and then dived into the courtyard, swooping low over the heads of some dozing guards and startling them into alertness. He rose high, climbing vertically, before turning and spiraling down toward the point of the tower, veering away at the last possible moment and spreading his wings wide to slow his descent. As they glided over the forest, Hiccup noticed the clicking just in time and sprawled flat along Toothless' neck as he released a booming blue flame.

By the time they landed, Hiccup only vaguely singed and laughing, a considerable crowd had gathered. The triplets howled for a turn, while the chieftains watched with shrewd expressions. From Toothless'

back Hiccup turned to Wee Dingwall and held out a hand; the boy grabbed it, his eyes wide with excitement even as his father shouted protests, and climbed on. "Easy, please," Hiccup requested, and they took flight.

After the heirs had all had a go (some more reluctantly than others, but none willing to dishonor himself by not riding when the others had), Hiccup took the triplets up, one at a time and secured with a rope around the waist. At their delirium he was very glad that there was no way they could ride Toothless unassisted. If they had their own dragons they would put the twins' antics to shame in no time, especially when one of them invented the game of throwing a stick while in flight for Toothless to burn.

"Okay, I think that's enough," Hiccup said, lifting the boy down and preparing to slide off himself. Toothless stopped him with a sudden shake, jerking his head toward where Merida stood, arms crossed and foot tapping. He whispered, "Good save, bud," then held out his hand, grinning. She didn't hesitate but raced forward, grabbed his hand and vaulted onto Toothless' back.

With her arms wrapped around him and her chin resting on his shoulder, it was easily his favorite flight of the day.

18. Chapter 18

Hiccup had walked with Toothless down to the lake to fish, and the triplets had tagged along. After attempting to keep the boys out of mischief he understood Maudie's constant nervousness and exhaustion; they'd stolen a small rowboat and gotten a hundred yards out on the water, only turning back when Toothless threatened to toast them, and thrown each other overboard as casualties from a battle with the great sea serpent, also played by Toothless. Then one of them had distracted Hiccup while the others crept behind him and dumped handfuls of duckweed from the shallows on his head, which meant he'd had to jump in the lake to get it off. By the time he was ready to head back he let the boys ride on Toothless' back, not as a reward, but to keep them from getting in any more trouble.

Once he'd deposited the triplets with Maudie he made his way toward his room through a quiet castle. Eerily quiet, in fact; there was no yelling or the sound of things being thrown from the great hall, though when he looked in, the chieftains and their sons were all there with Fergus, Elinor, and Merida. He was about to turn back and take the back stairs when Elinor called him into the room.

Hiccup wondered what they'd been up to as he crossed the room. The big dictionary was open on the table, along with papers covered with scrawled writing and mugs of drink. The king stood up, cleared his throat and looked at the paper in his hand. "We have come to an agreement," he said, and Hiccup's eyes went wide. Fergus was about to tell him what they'd decided, and Hiccup was standing there with damp hair and duckweed clinging to his pants.

"All of the suitors will return home, leaving no later than the end of the week. They will all return in a year and a day from this day, and when they do—" He paused, squinting, and Hiccup couldn't breathe until he continued. "Merida will be married, to whichever man she chooses. The clan chieftains will accept that man, whoever he is,

as the princess' consort and the rightful king, when the time comes."

Hiccup nodded, as the lump in his throat made it hard to speak. It was a good decision, he thought, a fair one. They had all but acknowledged that she would choose him when the time came, while still giving both of them a way out. If his feelings changed, all he had to do was not show up; though it would be hard luck for him if hers did. Still, he had no doubt that if that happened, they would receive him graciously and give him a respite before sending him home with their best wishes.

Young MacGuffin's lips twitched into a small smile, and Wee Dingwall nodded vaguely; even the Macintosh heir winked conspiratorially. Their fathers' expressions were less friendly, but neither were they hostile, and he couldn't blame them—they had each been hoping to have a king for a son one day, but for some reason they had agreed to honor Merida's wishes and accept a foreigner, if necessary. He wished he could ask why. Likely they recognized the foolishness of forcing their future queen into doing something against her will, and maybe they saw something worthy in him. Fergus mostly looked relieved that he was done delivering the speech, though he smiled fondly when he saw Hiccup's eyes on him; Elinor's smile was pleased and warm, and he felt a surge of affection for the woman who had allowed them to communicate. And Merida—

He'd been afraid that she'd had to agree to the plan, but one look at her made him think that maybe the whole thing had been her idea. Under the agreed terms, she'd have time to decide who she wanted to marry and prepare herself for the wedding, without any of them being there to bother her. She would have a year of freedom, time to ride in the forests with Angus and fight with her brothers and learn from her parents. And time to miss him, he hoped, looking at her eyes blazing with determination and her sweetly curving lips. She met his gaze fiercely, a challenge and a promise on her face, and he felt hope fill him.

It would be a year and a day without her. A year and a day to plan, to build a boat, to earn something worth offering her. A year and a day to convince his father and to help someone else prepare to become the chieftain. A year and a day to study, to save up words so that when he returned he could say all the things she deserved to hear. A year and a day with the dragons.

A year and a day until he never had to leave her again.

End
file.